



## **Social News Sites as Democratic Media**

### **An evaluative study of Reddit's coverage of the 2012 US presidential election campaign**

Szabo, András

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## PhD thesis

András Szabó

# Social News Sites as Democratic Media

An evaluative study of Reddit's coverage of the 2012 US presidential election campaign



Academic advisor: Klaus Bruhn Jensen

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Institutnavn:	Institut for Medier, Erkendelse og Formidling
Name of department:	Department of Media, Cognition and Communication
Author:	András Szabó
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Subject description:	Empirical analysis and normative theoretical evaluation of social news site Reddit's coverage of the 2012 US presidential election. Reddit, although nominally democratic, is shown in general to be failing to meet normative criteria derived from three ideal types of democracy; a way of salvaging its democratic potential is proposed.
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# Abstract

This thesis presents an empirical analysis and normative theoretical evaluation of Reddit, a social news website, focusing on its coverage of the 2012 US presidential election campaign. It explores the site's structural features and organization, and evaluates its coverage by standards derived from three different ideal concepts of democracy. The study uses various qualitative and quantitative methods to give a comprehensive account of Reddit as a news organization that is built on the collaboration of its users' communities.

From the perspective of liberal-individualist democracy, most of Reddit's coverage was found to be inadequate, failing to realize the principle of free expression in a meaningful manner. In particular, the site largely acted as a soapbox exclusively for supporters of the Democratic Party.

From the perspective of communitarian-republican democracy, Reddit emerged as a community of like-minded individuals, instead of an inclusive and diverse community whose members would have recognized their shared political responsibility.

From the perspective of deliberative democracy, Reddit, as a social news site, would be required to contribute to the formation of considered strands of public opinion. Structurally, the site was found to be well suited for this task, but in practice, it mostly failed to actualize its deliberative potential.

However, in spite of the site's generally disappointing performance, the study did identify particular sections with valuable contributions to a substantially democratic coverage of the election.

The thesis concludes by putting the mostly disappointing results into broader historical and technological context, and by proposing an alternative way to harness Reddit's precarious democratic potential.

## Dansk resumé

Denne afhandling fremlægger en empirisk analyse og teoretisk-normativ evaluering af Reddit - et socialt nyhedswebsite – med udgangspunkt i Reddits dækning af den amerikanske præsidentvalgkamp i 2012. Afhandlingen udforsker websitets strukturelle egenskaber og interne organisation og evaluerer på den baggrund valgkampsdækningen ud fra standarder, som afledes af tre forskellige normative idealer om demokrati. Afhandlingen anvender flere forskellige kvalitative og kvantitative metoder for at kunne give en udførlig redegørelse for Reddit som en ny og særlig form for nyhedsorganisation, der er opstået gennem de forskellige samarbejder og fællesskaber mellem brugerne på sitet.

Fra et liberalt-individualistisk demokrati-perspektiv må størstedelen af Reddits dækning opfattes som utilstrækkelig, da sitet ikke kunne realisere princippet om ytringsfrihed på en meningsfuld måde. Websitet fungerede i særdeleshed som en talerstol næsten udelukkende for tilhængerne af Det Demokratiske Parti.

Fra et kommunitaristisk-republikansk demokrati-perspektiv fremstår Reddit som et fællesskab af ligesindede individer, i stedet for et inklusivt og mangfoldigt fællesskab, hvis medlemmer anerkender deres fælles politiske ansvar.

Fra et deliberativt demokrati-perspektiv ville Reddit som socialt nyhedswebsite være forpligtet til at bidrage til dannelsen af betragtelige dele af den offentlige opinion. På et strukturelt niveau viste Reddit sig velegnet til at løfte denne opgave, men i praksis fejlede webstedet i forsøget på at aktualisere det deliberative potentiale.

På trods af websitets generelt skuffende præstationer, er undersøgelsen i stand til at identificere visse dele af dets indhold som værdifulde bidrag til den demokratiske proces frem mod valget. Afhandlingen sætter afslutningsvis de hovedsageligt skuffende resultater i et videre historisk og teknologisk perspektiv og foreslår en alternativ tilgang til at udnytte Reddits ustabile demokratiske potentiale.

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# Part I. Introduction

## Chapter 1. An overview of the project

### 1.1. Problem statement and research question

This is a study of *Reddit*, a social news website. It describes **how, and how well, Reddit covered the 2012 US presidential election campaign**. It does so by exploring its structural features and organization as well as evaluating the content it produced by standards derived from three different ideal concepts of democracy.

Social news sites represent a relatively new development in the field of journalism. They are endowed with a certain democratic potential, in the sense that they provide their users with easy-to-use tools to exercise control over publicly available information. Thus they are potential agents of "information democratization" (Tewksbury & Rittenberg 2012). I argue that it is both interesting and important to assess, using empirical evidence, the extent to which such sites live up to this potential of *nominal*, or *formal*, democratization.

It is equally important to uncover whether the nominal democratization of information also means *substantial* democratization.

Trivially, members of modern societies rely on mediated public information in several aspects of the conduct of their lives. In states that are widely regarded as democratic, such public information is crucial in part because it forms the basis on which citizens can exercise their political rights. Thus it might feel intuitively true that the more power ordinary citizens have over publicly available information, the more society as a whole will benefit.

But information democratization by the numbers might not, in fact, be a necessary, let alone a sufficient, condition of democracy. Some conceptual models of democracy suggest that the quality of available public information can be independent of the ways in which it is produced, distributed, or curated. Conversely, other ideas suggest that the formal democratization of public information is necessary, but insufficient: citizens should be able to exercise control over the production and distribution of public information - but democracy can only function well if this information also meets certain other requirements<sup>1</sup>. Democracy is a very popular, but also protean concept: normative theories tend to disagree on what it should mean - and, consequently, what the *substantial* dimension of information democratization should entail.

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<sup>1</sup> Here I'm only considering aspects of public information - obviously these are only a subset of conditions that enable democracies to exist.

Instead of singling out one particular interpretation of democracy as the best of all, in this thesis, I compare three different visions of democracy, and evaluate the performance of Reddit according to each of these. Importantly, I am not in the business of theory development: I do not evaluate the models themselves, attempt their synthesis, or propose further alternatives. I merely use these models to provide my analysis a firm theoretical grounding - one which is sometimes missing from studies of similar kind.

## 1.2. What is Reddit?

Reddit is a **social news website (SN)**. SN are online communities that filter, curate and aggregate online contents. On the basis of their users' opinion, they provide an answer to the question: what is worthy of our attention at the moment?

SN are similar in function to algorithmic news aggregators - such as *Google News* -, but their output is not the result of the work of algorithms, but of human users. Members of the site - *redditors* - post hyperlinks to it; links that point to whatever content on the web their submitters consider interesting. Other redditors comment and vote on the submitted links: approval is expressed by an upvote (or "upboat" in Reddit lingo), disapproval by a downvote. Those submissions that receive most upvotes during a given time period are promoted to a more visible area of the website, dubbed "front page." This front page consists of a constantly updated list of popular content, as chosen, and commented on, by redditors.

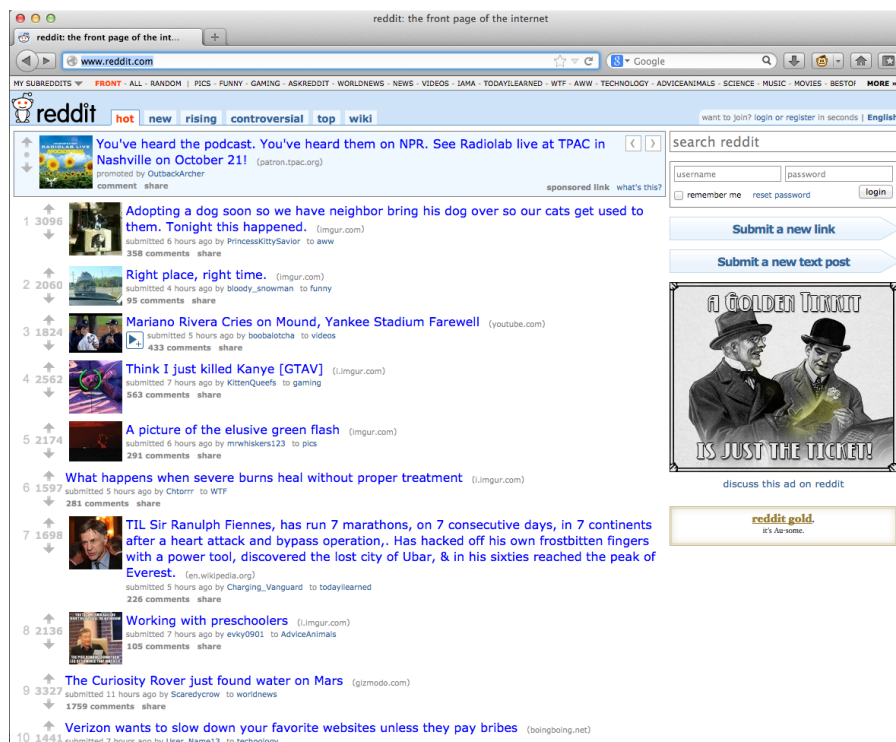


Figure 1. Reddit's front page

In other words, Reddit is a site of reflective critique and filtering of mediated public information. This critique has the potential to be constructive, in the sense that it also involves proposing alternatives. Redditors are not only rejecting contents that they dislike, but also, explicitly or implicitly, suggesting other articles that they do like. What is more, structural features of Reddit (and, to a lesser extent, of other SN) promote a fundamental equality of content: regardless of the original publisher of an article, the sole arbiter of its worthiness is the community of readers. Thus, SN have the potential to level the playing field between various media organs in the fight for audiences. In their meritocratic regime, alternative media - from the proverbial lonely blogger in her pyjamas to the activists of *Daily Kos* - have, in theory, just as much chance of making it to the front page as the *New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*.

Built on a simple mechanism to aggregate crudely articulated expressions of opinion, Reddit's editorial process realizes a lightweight<sup>2</sup> collaboration of users. Participating is easy; the flip-side being that editorial decisions need not reflect any kind of serious, reasoned consideration of arguments about the merits of a piece of content. By default, every one of the thousands of redditors makes up their mind about an article alone, without considering anyone else's point of view - and votes are tallied in the end. Perhaps professional editors could take offence by my suggesting that this can even be called an "editorial" regime. But it is a process that, precisely because of its undemanding and simple nature, can empower anyone capable of accessing the web, including those who are otherwise disenfranchised from being represented in established media.

Reddit's editorial process itself captures the duality of formal and substantial democratization. Perhaps SN do empower large groups of widely different users - but there is also a chance that in reality, the supposedly democratic technology ends up creating new hierarchies, as in the case of blogs, according to Hindman (2009). Whether or not that happens is an empirical question. And another empirical question concerns the performance of such an editorial process (whoever it involves): does it produce contents that can be labelled democratic in a substantial sense<sup>3</sup>? In my dissertation, I attempt to address both of these questions.

### **1.3. Why study Reddit?**

Democracy can be defined in any number of ways, but in general it tends to bear positive connotations. I believe this simple fact explains much of the research interest directed at new media

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<sup>2</sup> See Haythornthwaite (2011).

<sup>3</sup> As I noted above, the dividing line between formal and substantial democratization might be blurred, insofar as the latter might, at least in a certain theoretical articulation, incorporate the former. Nevertheless, throughout this thesis I try to maintain this analytical distinction.

in the social sciences and humanities. One does not have to subscribe to technological determinism to accept that new technology might affect social and communicative practices, and to entertain the possibility that these changes might be beneficial, by bringing about more egalitarian social relations. The internet and its assorted services intuitively seem democratic at least from the point of view of access; and so it is assumed that they *might* also contribute to the emancipation of users in various other domains of social life. In part, this assumption motivates my study as well.

Another reason to study SN lies in their - growing - popularity. According to online technology magazine *Mashable* (Fiegerman 2012), Reddit now can claim around 43 million unique visitors amassing around 8 billion page views each month. According to Alexa (Anon 2012c), an online traffic analyst firm, Reddit is the 64<sup>th</sup> most visited website in the US - less visible than the website of the *New York Times*, but more popular than that of the *Wall Street Journal*.



Figure 2. Share widgets on The Independent

According to digital strategist Kate Gardiner<sup>4</sup>, such popularity does not go unnoticed by publishers - who see Reddit, and other SN, as increasingly important tools of viral marketing (Gardiner 2012). Such sites are obviously on the radar of mainstream media organs, too. Online editions of large (e.g. the *New York Times* or *The Economist*) as well as smaller (e.g. *The Florida Times-Union* or *Runners' World*) newspapers and magazines now incorporate tools to facilitate the sharing of their online articles through SN (see Figure 2). And it is not only in distribution that SN matter: one does not have to look long for cases where established media organs used SN as a resource, picking up stories that broke there. Anon (2011), Latif (2011), Petrou (2011), and Samways (2011) are only a handful of examples where SN are credited as a source, from spring - summer 2011. Certain politicians and celebrities have also shown awareness of SN as means to directly reach large audiences - Barack Obama being a case in point (PresidentObama (Reddit user name) 2012a,

4 See <http://dstl.it/>.

(PresidentObama (Reddit user name) 2012b).

Simply put, SN demand attention, as a peculiar, and increasingly popular service and technology.

#### 1.4. What new this research is bringing to the table

This dissertation contributes to the field of media and communication studies by proposing a theoretically grounded and empirically feasible framework for the analysis of SN, and by carrying out such an analysis in a particular, historically important context. It attempts to improve and expand on existing studies of this kind in part by problematizing and elaborating on the normative framework that has informed much previous research. In this regard, I hope my interpretation of the models of democracy involved will stimulate further discussion about their respective merits.

This study is a piece of research that also stands to complement existing studies that focus on the operational mechanism of SN. Other studies, as presented in Chapter 2.2 - 2.3, have discussed SN, but most often did so in a content-agnostic manner. My study focuses on content, yet considers relevant findings from others too, preoccupied with structures. Taken together, these two strands of research are expected to lead to a better understanding of how, and why, SN function.

An additional set of contributions are methodological in nature. Most importantly, the study provides an example of translating abstract normative frameworks into empirically measurable, operational variables (a thorny issue in the field of media studies; see e.g. McQuail 1993, pp.10–17). Although one of the points I emphasize here is the importance of *context*, I believe that other studies could benefit from this example.

#### 1.5. An illustrated overview

The research agenda of this thesis is illustrated in the following figure.

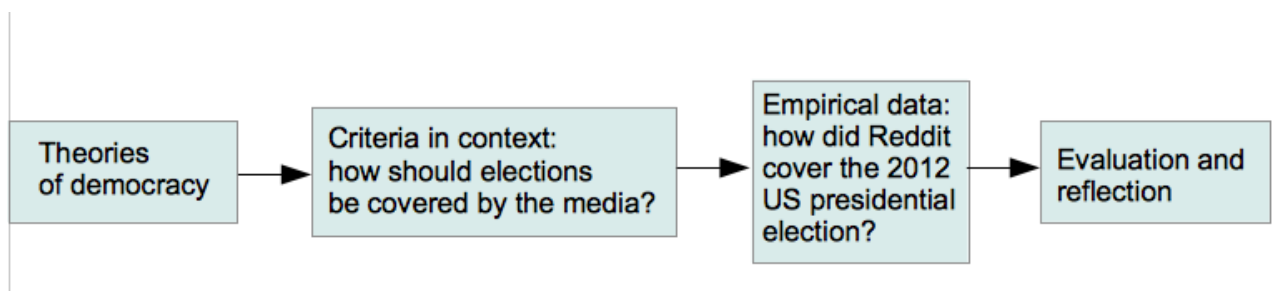


Figure 3. Research strategy

Based on normative theories, I reconstruct three ideal types of democracy: its liberal-individualist, communitarian-republican, and deliberative variants. These ideal types represent three visions of what democracy could, and ought to, be. Naturally, they differ in some important respects, but they



also share some common ground. Importantly, they all imagine a meaningful, substantial relationship between media and democratic citizenship. This connection renders the normative performance review of media a meaningful undertaking.

From the three models of democracy, I derive evaluative standards concerning the media coverage of elections of representatives - an event of particular importance for most visions of democracy. In creating these standards, I rely on an analytical framework proposed by Peter Dahlgren (2005), advocating a "public sphere perspective." The framework suggests considering the *structural*, *representational*, and *interactional* dimensions of actors in the public sphere, thus it is in these three dimensions that I formulate requirements concerning Reddit's election coverage.

I then apply these standards to empirical data regarding the actual performance of Reddit during the 2012 US presidential election. This involves the analysis of the site's structural features, as well as its two kinds of contents: its primary contents of news articles, and its secondary contents of redditors' discussions. In the analysis, I take advantage of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Finally, I evaluate and reflect on Reddit's performance, and propose ways to improve it as a democratic resource.

## Chapter 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Normative media theory

Normative critique of the media is probably as old as mediated communication itself. Due to their perceived importance, media easily lend themselves to critique by academics as well as laypersons, legislators as well as media professionals themselves. The printing press with movable type barely had time to spread when its products were already criticised as spreading unreliable and irresponsible rumours (Conboy 2004, p.8) - and ever since then, normative discussions of the media continue unabated (McQuail 2010, pp.162–166).

Some of this critique lacks explicit recognition of the importance of media in maintaining a political system (democratic or other). Normative media critique is not always political in this sense. For instance, many studies of violence, nudity and profanity in television programmes (Wilson et al. 2002) are concerned with normative issues of a narrower scope: evaluating media performance by standards that are not explicitly related to political ideologies. But there is also an important body of literature available that makes the connection between political and media systems clear, and delineates how, accordingly, media are supposed to serve the interest of the public as a political community. It is this latter line of research that my thesis fits into.

Since the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a dominant frame in this line of theorizing has been that of the media as the 4<sup>th</sup> estate: a resilient rhetorical tool to assert the legitimacy of journalism. This narrative, tied to liberal political philosophy, sees the media as both enablers and guardians of individual freedom and political equality, two fundamental democratic values. In simple terms, the media should provide autonomous citizens with information, with means of expression, and with means of participation in discussion about matters of public concern. In order to be able to do all this, the media should first and foremost be free - independent of, and resistant to, the power of the state. One of the first vocal proponents, and main theoreticians, of 4<sup>th</sup> estate narrative was John Stuart Mill (2002); and his legacy is carried on to this day, among others, by organizations such as *Freedom House* and *Reporters Without Borders*, ranking countries in function of their perceived press freedom. Importantly, this liberal tradition largely defined the development of professional norms of modern news journalism (Conboy 2004, p.111), with a focus on the self-professed independence of journalists, resulting in *objective*, dispassionate accounts of reality (Briggs & Burke 2009, pp.187–188); on the contested notion of objectivity, see Tuchman (1980).

The narrative of the 4<sup>th</sup> estate continues to be a popular, if not anymore dominant, discourse of journalism. It also has been challenged, notably by social responsibility theory (Hutchins 1947), which underlined the importance of the service that the press should render to the public, and problematized the relationship between the quality of this service, and a free press - regulated solely by market principles. This theory suggests that the press should be *empowered*, with state assistance, if necessary, to carry out its public service; notably, to act as a watchdog of political representatives and decision makers in order to make sure they are acting in the public interest.

According to Christians et al. (2009, p.3), "since the 1960s, a rich expansion of thought has taken place regarding normative theories of public communication, models of democracy, and the roles of journalism in democratic societies." One seminal tome of this expansion of thought is *Four Theories of the Press* (1956), which mapped four different conceptual models of the media as actors in various political systems. Although "historically oversimplifying," "analytically inadequate," and very much "a child of the Cold War era," biased towards liberalism (Christians et al. 2009, pp.4–5), this work has proven quite influential, at least in the amount of discussion it helped generate. Christians et al. (2009, pp.5–16) provide an overview of contemporary normative media theory development in the US, Europe, and elsewhere; below I refer to a few ideas from this tradition that are particularly relevant to my project at hand.

Note that my quick and simplistic summary does not do justice to the nuanced, careful evaluation of many of the studies cited. My aim here is simply to point out the existence of an established tradition of normative theorizing about media. In later sections of the thesis, I revisit relevant theories in detail.

Questioning the philosophical underpinnings of liberalism, *public sphere theory* identified a different, more complicated link between media and the political process. In one of the foundational works of this line of theorizing, the young Jürgen Habermas (1989, originally published in German in 1962) turned to Kant's idea of public reason to suggest that the media, as principal organizers and actors of the public sphere, had both *social* and *political* functions. In the former aspect, the media help strangers get integrated into a community, whereby common ties, interests and values are recognized and nurtured. In the latter aspect, media are organizers and active moderators of the public deliberation that ideally serves as legitimating grounds for political decisions<sup>5</sup>.

Habermas and his numerous critics have revisited the original formulation of public sphere theory,

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5 "Democratic theory focuses on accountability and responsiveness in the decision-making process; theories of the public sphere focus on the role of public communication in facilitating or hindering this process" (Ferree et al. 2002, p.205).

which by today encompasses innumerable contributions. But this original formulation is still influential today. One example of recent, explicitly Habermasian critique of traditional media is offered by Crawford (2009). A more detailed framework is proposed by Wessler (2008), who develops a model for measuring the deliberativeness of news media in international comparison, considering the implications of different cultural/political contexts (as theorized by Hallin and Mancini (2005)). Wessler's study is built on, and thus provides an overview of, previous research, notably including Ferree et al. (2002), and Bennett et al. (2004).

Bracketing the connection to deliberative democracy, another line of theory focuses on media as institutions of social coordination and community building. Such - communitarian - theories often prioritize *alternative* values - that is, alternative to the ones traditionally associated with a liberal concept of journalism. For instance, professional journalists might be required to act not as dispassionate, objective witnesses of reality, but as engaging, inspiring agents of communal cohesion (Atton 2003, Rodríguez 2011).

Finally, inspired by cultural studies, some theories change focus by re-conceptualizing the relationship between citizens and media. Other theories had described the media as an institution sharing information and passing influence, in a top-down fashion, onto receivers. In contrast, culturalist theories (e.g. Fiske & Hartley 2003 [1978], Newcomb & Hirsch 1983) draw on alternative models of communication, and emphasize the role of active audiences in the creation of meaning. These theories present the media - television in particular - "not merely [as] a source of images and texts impressing information and opinions on viewers, but also a repository and a resource - a forum - articulating and negotiating meanings and world views on behalf of the culture at large" (Jensen & Helles 2011, p.2). A key implication of doing so is recognizing the possible validity of several alternative normative frameworks, related to particular world views and identities of particular audiences. If media provide us with expressions and articulations of these various views based on genuine human experience, then the rejection of some of these expressions on an arbitrarily normative basis is morally problematic. Still, cultural relativism doesn't make normative theorizing impossible - on the contrary; support for relativism itself being a claim with normative foundations (Fiske 1987).

## **2.2. Normative critique of new media**

Within the broad field of normative media critique, a strand of literature has recently emerged, focusing its attention on *new media*. My dissertation aims to be part of this strand, which thus needs

some more in-depth exploration.

Some authors (e.g. O'Hara (2002); Dylko et al. (2011), Curran et al. (2012)) summarize this body of literature by invoking an often loosely defined concept of democratization, and a narrative of opposing forces: optimists and pessimists.

In this narrative, optimists (e.g. Benkler (2006), Bruns (2008), Rheingold (2003), or Gillmor (2006)) regard new forms of communication, enabled by new technology, as instruments of *social* democratization: tools which democratize access to those fundamental resources so dear to democracy (information, representation, participation). There is an inherently democratizing potential in many forms of new technology, and although this doesn't necessarily mean that there's a technological fix to social problems, it does suggest that new media technology, under the right circumstances, could realistically enhance our lives.

Pessimists, in contrast, question either the assumption that new media themselves would have an inherently democratic potential, the assumption that supposedly democratic technology is inclusive and universally available (Downey 2007), or the idea that new media are actually being used in ways that promote progressive social development (e.g. Davis & Owen (1998), Keen (2007)). The pessimist view, in short, questions the extent to which new media technology contributes to, or even enables, substantial democratization of societies.

An emerging body of empirical evidence has shown a messy reality where both parties are both right and wrong.

On the one hand, it is not difficult to find examples of new media technology being an agent of information democratization, empowering ordinary citizens to make a difference by (co-)producing high-impact, highly visible journalism that supports progressive social action. Citizen journalists had shady politicians resign (Bowman & Willis 2003, pp.8–9); set the political agenda during election campaigns (Russell 2011, pp.52–58) as well as in the political off-season (Bakardjieva 2011); stood up to authorities to help serve justice (Antony & Thomas 2010); organized online protests that appeared to influence legislation (Pepitone 2012); and in the case of certain news outlets, have become accepted as regular, trustworthy news producers (*OhMyNews* in South Korea (Curran et al. 2012, p.21)). Some argue that new media also played an important role in not only figurative, but actual revolutions and social-political movements: e.g. in Iran (Khiabany 2012), Tunisia and Libya (Dahdal 2012) or Egypt (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira 2012). And there are signs of new technology improving traditional, mainstream journalism too. The 2010 Pulitzer prize

for breaking news reporting was awarded to the staff of the *Seattle Times*: their "speedy and accurate" coverage of a shooting incident and an ensuing manhunt relied heavily on *Twitter* and *Google Wave*, and made use of readers' feedback (Marchionni 2013).

On the other hand, compelling evidence also seems to suggest that a revolution of journalism, and a concomitant renaissance of democracy, has been indefinitely postponed (Curran et al. 2012). In less fortunate parts of the world, new media technology is becoming as much a tool of authorities as of protesters trying to fight censorship (Morozov 2011). And in countries widely recognized as democratic, the (political-)economic reality is that of "business as usual:" the spread of new, and often personally empowering technologies does not seem to challenge persisting power structures (Fenton 2010, Hirst 2011). Mainstream media organizations might be crippled by financial troubles - and at least one source of these troubles is related to the loss of advertising revenue that is tied to digitalization (Schudson 2010) -, but they are still the most important organizers of mass communication. They set the standards and operate the conventions that alternative or citizen media must abide by if they ever hope to become visible (Goode & McKee 2013, p.114).

Encouraging and disillusioned accounts of the latest developments in media systems illustrate the "heteroglossia of cultural discourse" (Conboy 2004, p.224), where even the very concept of journalism is contested. There are attempts to reconcile divergent accounts - as exemplified, among others, by Benkler (2011) and Newman et al. (2012). They distinguish between mainstream and alternative media (the "5<sup>th</sup> estate") on the basis of professed values, tools and practices - a whole news culture -, and describe their relationship as involving both competition and cooperation. Importantly, mainstream and alternative are not necessarily equal parties in this relationship, in spite of their mutual reliance on one another. As the societal institution of journalism opens up to non-professional practitioners, innovation is realized on terms laid out by established, traditional media - by the power of their resources and conventions (Ostertag & Tuchman 2012).

Part of this tradition are studies that approach the question of information democratization with an even narrower scope - focusing on particular online services and technologies. Research of (a) blogs, (b) discussion forums, (c) news aggregators, and (d) general purpose social network sites is especially relevant for this dissertation, as social news sites integrate the functions of these services.

(a) By the early 2000s, **weblogs** were touted as "the long-awaited answer to journalism's longstanding weaknesses" (Kenix 2009, p.793) - to wit: established media's connectedness to

political and economic interests. Blogs were seen as the alternative; the tools that would emancipate every reader by turning them into journalists (Gillmor 2006, Coleman 2005). Admittedly, even in the enthusiasm surrounding the proliferation of blogs in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, academics noticed that their overwhelming majority did not address hard news - or any kind of news at all. Instead, their focus was narcissistic, journal-like self-disclosure (Papacharissi 2010, p.145). But the ones that did cover politics and current events were found to be influential harbingers of a new era of journalism (Rosen 2005), at least in the US.

However, the American blogosphere was also quickly revealed to be highly polarized (Tremayne et al. 2006, Farrell et al. 2008), suggesting that even if blogs enabled new kinds of democratic, discursive participation in public affairs, they also helped reorganize the public sphere along ideological fault lines<sup>6</sup> (Shaw & Benkler 2012). Some critics, notably Cass Sunstein (2007) and Marcus Prior (2007), warned that this development threatened to erode the common ground on which various groups and members of society could stand in order to conduct meaningful political discussion. And others dismissed the democratizing effect of blogs as *nominal* but not *substantial*: according to Hindman (2009), the important question is not who are writing on the web - millions and millions -, but who are actually being read and listened to - a few select elite members of the blogosphere. Hindman's analysis reveals that, far from giving voice to a large variety of marginalized groups, blogs tend to replace older hierarchies with newer ones.

By today, blogs have become a naturalized part of the media ecosystem, serving established, mainstream media organizations as well as alternative outsiders. If there is anything conclusive to be said about "blogs as such," it is that they come in a variety of forms and shapes - it is futile to ask questions about their collective merits and flaws. Blogs are used in various ways, both furthering and impeding information democratization, as a hit-and-miss extension of pro journalism (Gil de Zúñiga 2009, Xenos 2008); thus, there is little that connects them on a conceptual level.

One of these connections, a defining feature of blogs, however, is important to mention, because it is an important way in which they differ from social news sites (SN). Namely, blogs tend to be personal platforms of information dissemination, whereas SN are open platforms that, in theory, can direct their readers' attention to a wide variety of sources. Blogs are inherently proprietary - a blog is always someone's blog -, but SN are open platforms; soapboxes for everyone<sup>7</sup>. As Hindman argues, blogs failed to live up to democratic hopes as they developed their exclusive elite league. But SN, given their openness, might still realize the dream of levelling the playing field between mainstream and alternative, elites and non-elites.

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6 Lower levels of ideological fragmentation characterize the blogospheres of the UK and Germany (Hyun 2012).

7 "Reddit [...] gives literally anyone who has something interesting enough to say the ability to reach millions" (Tynski 2012).

(b) **Online discussion forums** lend themselves well for studies inspired by deliberative theory. After all, the internet seems to solve a set of problems tied to the realization of large-scale, public deliberation, by allowing would-be conversational partners to overcome practical and spatio-temporal barriers (Stromer-Galley 2002). Accordingly, a number of scholars have tried to measure the extent to which conversations in online settings could satisfy the criteria of deliberation: e.g. Wilhelm (1998), Dahlberg (2001b), Graham and Witschge (2003), Janssen and Kies (2005), Stromer-Galley (2007), and Polletta et al. (2009). Lately, with the growing popularity of social media, attention has shifted from dedicated discussion forums to occasional discussions materializing elsewhere: e.g. in comments to news articles (Ruiz et al. 2011), or in comments of YouTube videos (Goode et al. 2011). However, it is difficult to identify any substantial scientific consensus on the role of online discussions in deliberative democracy.

As Mutz (2008) points out, one of the reasons is that there has never been a consensus on what we should understand as deliberative democracy, or how we should operationalize its constitutive concepts. (Trénel (2004) provides an overview of some attempts.) Mutz (ibid) goes further in her critique, arguing that few studies of this tradition are grounded in previous empirical research; and that there are holes in our substantial understanding of the logical connections between various concepts that make up deliberative theory. With regard to online discussion and deliberation, we know very little - partly because of our inadequate questions.

Still, this line of research is instructive in at least two ways. First, it draws attention to the difficulties involved in translating normative theoretical concepts into empirical measures and standards, while it also provides pointers on how (not) to go about this task. And second- if there is a common ground that seems to emerge from the literature, it is that a strictly rational understanding of deliberation - often, in my view, stemming from an overly narrow reading of Habermas' works - is likely to be an inadequate tool to capture the democratic essence of online discussions.

(c) **News aggregators**, such as *Yahoo! News* and *Google News*, have also been subject to research similar to this study. One likely reason for this is their growing importance: as more and more readers ditch paper-and-ink publications for online sources (Standage 2011), those who make the switch online tend to substitute their daily papers with aggregators, because these offer an alternative that outperforms physical newspapers in terms of convenience and diversity (Gaskins & Jerit 2012). In 2011, *Yahoo! News* emerged as the most popular news site in the US (Olmstead et al. 2011). But beyond their popularity, news aggregators demand attention because they are seen as introducing new principles into the traditional creative process of journalistic production - with



implications for democracy.

For one, aggregators affect the presentational authority of newspapers: their ability to convey meaning through particular visual arrangements of content. The simple fact that an editor placed *Article X* on the front page, and *Article Y* on an inside page, implies that *X* is more important. But such editorial decisions are overwritten by aggregators that pull content from a large variety of sources to present them in new configurations, and in new contexts. For professional journalists, this is a normatively questionable practice (Carlson 2007), because aggregators' editorial decisions are qualitatively different - to wit, inferior to those of professional journalists.

Most aggregators (*Pulse* being a notable exception, see Mlot 2013) consider their primary objective the production of such news compilations that will *appeal to the reader*. One way to create such compilations is to follow what is already popular - similarly to the way in which online merchants recommend products based on their popularity with other customers. (If others liked it, perhaps you will like it, too.) But readers' and news professionals' standards tend to differ (Thorson 2008); leading to an editorial regime that does not reflect traditional news values which practising journalists like to see as pillars of democratic news journalism (Kinsley 2002).

To further complicate the situation, news aggregators are often personalizable: their users often may, and sometimes must, tailor their news diet to their highest satisfaction. For instance, readers may set the frequency with which *Google News* should include particular topics or sources in the compilation it offers to them. But personalized news diets may lead to the fragmentation of audiences into tiny enclaves of like-minded persons and, what's more, opinions within these enclaves are likely to polarize. This way, aggregators are threatening news as *public* information, as a *common resource* that provides the frames of democratic cooperation. The world of the "Daily Me" (Negroponte 1996), or even that of the "Daily We" (Russell 2011, pp.73–75), might be a paradise for the individual, but dangerous for democratic society (Sunstein 2007).

Relatively few pieces of empirical evidence are available regarding the performance of aggregators<sup>8</sup> (in addition to those already cited, see also Chowdhury and Landoni (2006), Weaver and Bimber (2008); about the possible effects of personalization: Feuz et al. (2011), Thurman and Schifferes (2012)). Still, considerable evidence has been found to show that online news use does not lead to the fragmentation of audiences and to the polarization of public opinion (Tewksbury & Rittenberg 2012, Trilling & Schoenbach 2012) - at least not to the extent that this would pose a substantial threat to news as a common resource, and basis for social coordination and cooperation. On the flip side, it has also been shown that news aggregators, while having a potential of information

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<sup>8</sup> I suspect this might be the result of methodological issues involved in making generalizations about the personalized experience of users.

democratization through the inclusion of a large variety of sources in their output, seem instead to reinforce the privileged status of a handful of mainstream outlets (Mutz & Young 2011, p.1033). At least that is the case with *algorithmic* news aggregators. Social news sites are aggregators, too - but their editorial principles are qualitatively different. Their content is not the result of algorithms measuring popularity as expressed by online traffic data - instead, it is the product of the reflexive, interpretive, and perhaps even thoughtful cooperation of thousands of editors; an articulation of collective intelligence (Lévy 1997). It seems reasonable to expect, then, that the output of social news sites is qualitatively different to that of algorithmic aggregators - but so far there is little evidence regarding this matter.

(d) Individuals' social networks have been recognized as an empowering resource, aiding the accumulation and management of social capital (e.g. Wellman & Berkowitz 1988, Putnam 2000). Social networks are maintained and nurtured in and through communication - thus, trivially, online communication also has the potential to help individuals manage their social relationships. **Social network sites** are services dedicated to this task.

In an overview of such sites, boyd & Ellison (2007) explore how they enable managing social contacts, and how, while doing so, users are allowed to reflect on, and experiment with, concepts of publicity, privacy, intimacy and identity, as expressed in various textual and visual forms. Thus, social network sites are widely regarded as empowering their users with autonomy and control of self-expression and interaction - values that are of high priority in modern, Western democracies. However, as Papacharissi (2010) points out, the practice of social network site use is ego-centred, not necessarily concerned with society as such, "[t]herefore, it makes sense to frame [social network sites] as *democratic*, but not *democratizing*" (p144, emphasis added). Pariser (2012) raises a similar point, arguing that social network sites make it easier to cut ourselves off from publicly relevant news and information.

In contrast, it has also been shown that social network sites can act as instruments of social and political mobilization (McGrath et al. 2012) - nurturing, in Putnam's terms, bridging, as well as bonding, social capital.

And, finally, it has also been emphasized that the autonomy and democratic (or democratizing) potential of such sites may be masking the ugly reality of users being exploited by sites' owners (Goode & McKee 2013, p.114).

This line of research draws attention to the democratic/democratizing potential of social relationships. But what is more interesting for my immediate purposes is the body of literature that tries to connect social network site use with practices of producing, accessing, and sharing *news*.

Surveys suggest that social media - and in particular, social network sites -, are increasingly important means of sharing and discussing news. In 2010, 75% of online news consumers in the US received some of their news "via e-mail or posts on social networking sites" (Purcell et al. 2010). A recent report (Olmstead et al. 2011) saw *Facebook* emerge as a major source of traffic for the five most visited US news sites; and an even more recent survey found that 20% of UK internet users "now come across a news story through a social network [...] with young people much more likely to access news this way (43%)" (Newman 2012, p.15). Hermida et al. (2012, p.815) also found that "social media are becoming central to the way we experience [access, share, and discuss] news." This is hardly a new phenomenon: it has been long accepted that interpersonal relationships affect the diffusion of information (Lazarsfeld et al. 1968 [1944]). We receive information - and we are subject to influence - through our interpersonal relationships, and we have good reasons to consider such information worthy of attention even if this was not warranted by intrinsic merits of its contents. In simple terms: we partly judge news not by its contents, but by who we hear them from.

"People can induce each other to a variety of activities as a result of their interpersonal relations and thus their influence goes far beyond the content of their communications. [...] Persons have two major avenues of influence while formal mass media [...] have only one" (Katz & Lazarsfeld 1955, pp.185–186).

Online social network sites merely provide their users with convenient, technologically new ways of what they have been always doing - sharing, recommending and discussing news<sup>9</sup> with others whose opinion they consider important. Not surprisingly, social networking site users tend to "value their personal network as a way to filter the news, rather than solely relying on the professional judgment of a news organization" (Hermida et al. 2012, p.816).

This leads to the question of the role of "friends" on social news sites.

"Friendship" is an aggrandizing term for the relationship between social news site users. SN do not try to establish online maps of offline interpersonal relations - although it is conceivable that offline friends join forces on social news sites. In fact, through the use of pseudonyms, a general lack of privacy, and the offer of limited tools of relationship and identity management (see Chapter 2.3, 11.3), they seem to discourage users from trying to nurture, *on site*, rich, reciprocal interpersonal relationships with fellow users. If so, then how does one's "network of fellow users" affect one's exposure to, and opinion of, news items of social news sites?

So far, we have only been able to reveal fractions of the answer. Doerr et al. (2012, p.796) suggest that friend networks are relatively unimportant: in their study of a social news site they found that

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<sup>9</sup> Mutz and Young anticipate a renaissance of research dealing with the relationship between interpersonal and mass communication precisely because of this development (2011, p.1038).

"users [...] react on average only with a probability of 2% to information propagated and received from friends" (ibid). To users of social news sites, this is hardly a surprising result; still, I argue that a more thorough exploration of the question is necessary.

Studies cited above tend to vary in scope and depth as well as in topic, but they stand on common ground. They all assume a fundamental relationship between online mediated communication and the democratic self-organization of individuals as members of a society; and they try to explore some aspects of this relationship through the study of particular instances of communication. Naturally, studies in this tradition tend to differ with regards to how strongly they articulate this claim. Some of them are quite explicit about the importance and characteristics of normative criteria, others barely hint at implicit qualities. Concerning these normative standards, a paper of special interest is by Deen G. Freelon (2010).

In a critique of previous, narrow and/or idiosyncratic evaluative criteria, he advocates a multi-dimensional approach, whereby online communication is examined through the lens of multiple possible normative frameworks. Perhaps an online forum seems not to conform with criteria of a Habermasian public sphere - but other conceptualizations of the public sphere exist, and it is arguably worthwhile to consider how the same forum could be evaluated against those.

Freelon distills previous theories into three distinct, but overlapping models of democracy - the liberal, the communitarian, and the deliberative. I follow the same route - although I try to produce a more nuanced exploration of the deliberative model in particular, as well as expanding the concept of communitarian democracy, demonstrating its close association with what Habermas refers to as *republican* democracy (see 5.2).

Hovering between the normative and empirical dimensions of democracy, Freelon establishes a list of indicative metrics for each of the three models: a list of characteristics that indicates which model of democracy a particular instance of online communication would approximate. For instance, a "discussion" rich in monologues and flaming<sup>10</sup> would best fit a liberal concept of democracy; whereas focused, inquisitive and argument-based discussion would be closer to the deliberative ideal. The main thrust of Freelon's paper is to provide alternatives to research singularly obsessed with deliberative democracy:

"Instead of discarding non-deliberative posts as conceptual detritus, [this] framework would allow them to be contextualized alongside deliberative content within a broader conceptualization of how design influences online political conversation" (2010, p.1184).

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10 Intense, verbally violent debate.

I fully agree with this idea. But I think the way in which the author puts it into practice results in a framework that, so to say, falls on the other side of the horse, implicitly suggesting that *every single instance* of online political discussion is democratic - the only question is to find out which democracy we are talking about.

In contrast, I would like to entertain the possibility that some instances of discussion cannot be meaningfully labelled democratic - not without the concept of democracy losing its role as a regulative ideal. Establishing three ideal concepts of democracy, and evaluating the performance of social news sites *separately, according to the three different, but overlapping sets of operational criteria*, allows me to do so.

### **2.3. Studies of social news sites (SN)**

Although SN are not the latest service to appear on the web<sup>11</sup>, the literature available on them is relatively scarce - especially when compared to general purpose social network sites and microblogs. What follows is the brief review of some of the more important studies available.

One of the first in-depth studies of social news sites was carried out by Nathaniel Poor (2005). He analysed *Slashdot* (probably the very first social news aggregator site) as "an online public sphere." Poor's perspective is explicitly normative, based on a concept of an ideal public sphere, as phrased by Habermas (1989). According to the analysis:

"Slashdot meets the four criteria laid out for an online public sphere: (1) it is a space of discourse; (2) it opens a space for a wide range of computer enthusiasts to come together and discuss many issues, (3) including many political ones; and (4) ideas are judged by their merit." (Poor 2005, p.12).

When assessing whether Slashdot meets these four criteria, Poor emphasises structural features and the role of algorithms. He offers scant evidence regarding the actual contents of the site. For instance, the article leaves one in doubt about whether "many political issues are [in fact] discussed" on Slashdot<sup>12</sup>. More importantly, in the lack of substantial content analysis, it is difficult to accept the author's claim regarding the 4<sup>th</sup> criterion cited above.

Poor's argument is that the moderation system of the site, combined with an elaborate system of feedback between users and moderators, guarantees that ideas expressed in discussion are judged by

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11 Social content-filtering and aggregating services have been around for more than a decade. Pioneers Slashdot and *Fark* were launched in 1997, while Digg - the now radically altered site that took the concept to unprecedented heights of popularity - took off in 2004, and Reddit in 2005. Twitter only came a year later!

12 This is only in part due to the lack of systematically collected evidence. The fact that "political content" is not defined clearly also contributes.

their merit. This moderation system, "without [which] *Slashdot* would not be a public sphere" (Poor 2005, p.5), is described in detail. Based on this description, it certainly seems possible that *Slashdot* enables conversation partners to act in a meritocratic way - but this leaves the question of whether or not this *actually* happens, open.

Thus, while taking important cues from Poor, I attempt to expand on his work, by systematically analysing the *contents*, as well as the structure, of SN.

An important part of the literature approaches SN through social network analysis, often complemented by computational/statistical analyses of the algorithms that operate such sites. Examples are provided by Ganley and Lampe (2006, 2009). Studying the case of *Slashdot*, they examined the relationships between the site's reputation management system and the users' social network. Hogan (2008), in turn, analysed *Digg* (the most popular social news site of the time<sup>13</sup>), in a paper that itself focused on methodology. Typical of literature of this strand, both Hogan's and Ganley and Lampe's papers treat SN and their users in abstraction: they are not primarily interested in the characteristics of the contents of the sites, either on a descriptive or on a prescriptive (normative) level.

Further examples of such studies include Szabo and Huberman (2010), Askalidis and Stoddard (2012), Doerr et al. (2012), and Hogg and Lerman (2012). These papers examine various nuances of crowdsourcing news aggregation mechanisms, for the most part defining content quality in abstraction, and from the emic perspective of users. Instead of trying to evaluate contents through external standards, such studies equate quality with popularity, as expressed by the users through site-specific features. Their main insight concerns the operational logic of such sites, answering questions such as: how do network structures and popularity patterns correlate? or How important are one's friends in getting a submitted article to the front page? (Or, in the case of Gilbert (2013): how could *Reddit* carry out its chosen task of compiling the best content available, if few of its users are actively curating (submitting) items?)

Rieseberg (2011) moves one step beyond such analyses, complementing the quantitative network-perspective with the qualitative study of some aspects of the contents published on *Reddit*.

Emphasizing that "the presence of a larger group of individuals is not equal to a virtual community" (2011, p.19), his primary interest lies in finding out what kinds of topic facilitate the existence of virtual communities - groups characterized by thicker communicative networks, and a sense of belonging and collective identity.

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<sup>13</sup> *Digg* folded and was sold in 2012, to be re-launched that year as a service that automatizes the aggregation of news. In its current (2013) form, it provides compilations of content based on its users' activity on Facebook and Twitter. (E.g. an article that is "liked" by many Facebook user is likely to get to the front page of *Digg*.)

This study draws attention to the duality of contents published on SN. On the one hand, such sites produce lists of hyperlinks that point to the best of the web. In this sense, the contents of SN are made up of the compilation of articles originally published elsewhere. On the other hand, they also publish the commentary and discussion of users - as records and artefacts of communities that are essentially constituted by (online, asynchronous) communication<sup>14</sup>. What is implied in Rieseberg's research is that we deal with *two different genres* here: two kinds of texts, with different forms, typically different topics, and different modes of address - i.e. conventions of intended use. This is an important distinction, because it suggests that these two kinds of content be evaluated according to different sets of normative criteria. It would make little sense to evaluate, say, an editorial piece from a newspaper, and a thread of discussions from Reddit, using the same standards. My study is mindful of this distinction.

Halavais (2009) switches the focus to the behaviour of individual Digg users, examining the role of feedback as incentive for further contributions. Eventually he does arrive at a tentative assessment of Digg's contribution to deliberative democracy (loosely defined as "Habermasian") - or rather, the lack thereof. According to Halavais, discussions on Digg don't tend to meet the criteria of rational deliberation. But his analysis is on the heuristic side, lacking in comprehensive and systematically collected evidence as well as precise conceptualization and operationalization of deliberation.

The same can be said about Weinberger's (2011) contribution. He is explicitly interested in "Reddit as community journalism," but his evaluation is based on anecdotal evidence and loose, intuitive standards. In fairness, his article is a blog post, conceivably addressed to the general public as opposed to the academic community. Still, I felt compelled to include his text here, because it nicely exemplifies the considerations that guide my own study: social news sites do some kind of journalism - and for the sake of democracy, qualities of this journalism are important.

This thought informs Goode's (2009) study too. Advocating a broad concept of (citizen) journalism, he provides a brief but insightful description of Digg as an organ of *metajournalism*: building on, re-contextualizing, re-packaging, questioning and in other ways engaging with other products of journalism. Goode voices questions about the supposedly democratic and meritocratic features of the site - although his paper is more about mapping a research agenda than about providing answers. I find his concept of metajournalism especially useful in understanding the activity of SN.

Finally, Sharon Meraz's (2009) study is quite similar to my dissertation, at least in aims if not in scope. Her objective, too, is to evaluate how SN - Digg, Reddit, Newsvine and Netscape - fulfil

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14 "[...] Delanty (2010) argues that 'virtual communities are no less real than traditional or other kinds of community, and that their distinctive nature consists in their ability to make communication the essential feature of belonging.'"(Rieseberg 2011, p.1)

their democratic potential. She does this through the analysis of articles published on these sites: their contents, their sources, and the users responsible for getting them to the front page. She finds evidence that "social media news sites are [...] rebalancing the power of [...] traditional media entities," insofar as they tend to feature a great deal of "citizen media" material (2009, p.141). She also suggests that "these sites exist [in part] to support civic engagement and political conversation;" that they provide a great variety of contents; and that their principles of democratic participation end up distorted in practice, as they "derive a large percent of their popular news stories from a cadre of elite users who hold disproportionate power" (2009, pp.140–142).

My study attempts to expand on Meraz's paper in three important ways. First, I problematize the question of democracy (her normative standards are implicit). Second, following Rieseberg's point described above, I also analyse the comments and discussions of users, in order to get a fuller picture of the role of SN as potential agents of democracy. And third, following Poor, my analysis covers the structural aspect of social news sites as well.



## **Part II. Theoretical background**

### **Chapter 3. Preface to the theoretical background**

Continuing the tradition of normative media critique, this dissertation analyses social news websites' contribution to information democratization through a specific example. This chapter outlines my research strategy and introduces the theoretical background I rely on.

#### **3.1. Research strategy**

I start by problematizing the connection between the political and media systems of a society. I then introduce three different visions of democracy, as reconstructed from existing literature. Next, I translate the three democratic ideals into empirically measurable criteria to be applied in a specific context; and finally, I apply these three sets of criteria to a specific practical example: that of a social news site's coverage of a recent presidential election.

##### **3.1.1. Media and politics**

Modern, industrialized mass societies rely on mediated mass communication. The same thesis, from the point of view of the individual, could be phrased as “we live in media”; or that we are part of the the “mediapolis” (Silverstone 2007). Some argue that the media, as an increasingly powerful social institution, exert an increasingly important influence on other social systems - including the political system (“mediatization,” Hjarvard 2013). But even if one questions such a thesis of mediatization, it is trivial that in mass societies, the political system - as well as other social systems, e.g. that of the economy - relies, to some extent, on the media (Hallin & Mancini 2005). Importantly, I'm not trying to suggest that this would be a one-way relationship, where the political system is somehow determined solely by the media. Neither am I advocating a return to theories of the mass media being a “magic bullet,” controlling passive and atomized audiences at whim. Interpersonal communication between active - perhaps even critical - audience members has been shown to be an important re-mediator of mass media (Lazarsfeld et al. 1968 [1944]) - in fact, this has been increasingly apparent through the spread of networked media, whereby interpersonal communication is often tied closely together distribution of mass media content (think of sharing news articles on Facebook) (Mutz & Young 2011). But saying that interpersonal communication networks, and personal interpretation, are important in information distribution and opinion formation doesn't mean that mass mediated information is *not* important in the same process. On the contrary: outlets of mass media, whether established institutions, accidental citizen

journalists, or anything in between, are crucial, because they provide “informational raw material,” organized into various overarching narrative frames, based on which personal reflection and interpersonal communication can spring to life. Readers, listeners, and viewers are expected to make up their own minds about how to interact with the media, and how to integrate whatever information they choose to retain into their established personal narratives. But the mass media still act as the most important provider and organizer of narrative and discursive frameworks in which citizens are able to articulate their views - for themselves as well as for others. Active and thinking audiences notwithstanding, the mass media matter.

One aspect of the connection between politics and media concerns democracies in particular: notably, that modern, mass democracies cannot exist without a “free press” - “free” meaning free “from control by government or other powerful interests, sufficient to allow [the media] to report and express freely and independently” (McQuail 2010, p.166). Only free - in this sense: independent - media can guarantee that political power is exercised in line with the public interest, partly because only the free press can guarantee that citizens are able to receive adequate information to further their own interests, and partly because such an independence of the media establishes a presumption of publicness - which in itself acts as a restraint on elected officials and other figures wielding power and authority (Sunstein 2007, pp.109–110). It is this aspect of mediated communication that informed the famous words of James Carey, “[j]ournalism and democracy are names for the same thing” (2000).

But my point is that *there are different ways to conceptualize democracy*; and thus there are different ways to understand “democratic mediated mass communication.” Continuing Carey's thought - tell me what your idea of democracy is, and I tell you what kind of journalism you prefer.

In my thesis, I introduce three alternative conceptual models of democracy, called liberal-individualist, communitarian-republican, and deliberative. These models, described in Chapters 4 - 6, are described as ideal types, distilled from existing literature. They embody three different visions of what democracy ought to be - and, consequently, of how the media are supposed to support these visions. I elaborate on these models in as great detail as necessary in order to fill the term “democracy” with substance.

The models overlap in significant ways - it is only ever possible to stretch the concept of democracy so far. But the models also diverge in important ways, and their differences have important implications for the kind of media system they demand. In order to give a full account of what these implications are, I need to translate the broad, general, overarching tenets of the three models into

empirically verifiable, specific normative criteria.

### 3.1.2. From abstract models to analytical criteria

Arguably, much normative theorizing about media is concerned with this very task: how to interpret abstract, general rules in practice? (McQuail 1993.)

As an illustration of the problem, consider the issue of diversity. It is easy to agree that the media should be diverse, with regard to their contents: they should cover many different issues and points of view - so as to promote diverse interests, as opposed to those of an exclusive group of citizens. In abstraction, diversity is a positive, democratic value, in the public interest. So far, so good.

But what diversity should mean *in practice* could be interpreted in a number of different ways. It could be taken to suggest that every single media outlet should offer diverse contents (internal diversity) - or that individual media outlets could be homogeneous in their contents, with a large choice of available outlets providing diverse contents (external diversity). Or perhaps some kind of middle ground could be reached, by suggesting that certain kinds of media need to be internally diverse, while external diversity should characterize the whole of the media system as such.

Policy makers and academics have been having such debates for decades - perhaps most famously in connection with broadcast television, where the scarcity of channels presented special circumstances (McQuail 1993, pp.49–64). The spread of new, networked media creates new circumstances, but it doesn't solve the problem - which is, essentially, a problem of scope. By this I simply mean that normative theories are built upon general, abstract norms that attempt to express certain universal values; but the practical application of these norms demand specificity, and the contextual application of abstract ideas. Thus, we need to bridge the gap between the scope of the abstract and general and the scope of the concrete and specific.

In order to do so, I take cues from James Curran (2005), and suggest that we best proceed by allowing for an internally differentiated media system. Instead of talking about the media as such, we're better off making distinctions between various kinds of media, depending on their intended tasks, roles, and modes of address.

This thought is reflected in the common distinction between *public service* and *commercial* media. This distinction recognizes the importance of media as a democratic resource. Public service media contribute to the social, cultural and economic coordination and development, as well as political cooperation, of citizens, by informing them, advocating for certain issues, and providing a forum for their views. At the same time, this distinction also recognizes that not all media are (nor *should* they be) concerned with such issues. It is not a problem that commercial media focus on a different set of

goals. And given the difference in their respective foci of activity, it is reasonable to apply different normative rules to these different kinds of media.

This is essentially my strategy as well, but I avoid the use of the terms “public service” and “commercial,” because of their acquired connotations. These terms are often seen primarily as markers of ownership (state vs. private ownership), whereas I think it's important to recognize that, irrespective of their ownership and the owners' financial considerations, all kinds of media outlets may render services to the public (as a polity). Acting in the public interest is not a privilege of public service media.

So, instead, I use the terms "**constitutive**" and "**non-constitutive**" outlets of media, in function of the perceived role of a specific media outlet in the formal political process. *Constitutive* outlets are such that deal in the explicit dissemination of political information, in political advocacy, and in providing a political forum to citizens. *Non-constitutive* outlets, in contrast, deal in apolitical activities, and claim no responsibility over the political process. Thus, *constitutive-ness* is incurred by choosing to engage in such media activity that is, from an external, normative perspective, considered constitutive part of the formal political system.

The distinction above doesn't imply that *non-constitutive* media would be in any way inferior or less important. I agree with the idea, echoed among others by Habermas' (1989) distinction between the political and cultural public spheres, as well as by cultural studies' scholars (e.g. Street 1997), that citizens as political subjects largely develop their identities *in settings outside the domain of formal politics*; and often taking advantage of what I call *non-constitutive* media. Acknowledging that politics and (popular) culture are intertwined in many ways, I'm asserting that certain media outlets are expected to play a part in the functioning of the formal, institutional political system, by virtue of choosing to deal with particular topics in a particular manner; and it makes sense to formulate normative criteria to judge the performance of these outlets.

What the term "outlet" could refer to is subject to a context-dependent decision. Perhaps a publication - a newspaper or magazine - could qualify as *constitutive*, perhaps some sections of a magazine that is otherwise non-constitutive. In the specific case of social news sites, I argue that it makes sense to articulate *constitutive-ness* on the level of *sections* - for details, see Chapter 12.1. The point here is simply that in order to translate general, abstract criteria into practically applicable standards, there is a need for an internally differentiated view of "media" as such. The distinction between *constitutive* and *non-constitutive* media does not try to pass judgement on the two

categories as such; it simply makes the claim that different kinds of media shall be evaluated according to different standards.

The second step in the path from abstract commandments to empirical standards is to **contextualize**: to consider how universal normative criteria could be applied to specific cases in particular circumstances.

For my project, I chose to focus on the case of the media coverage of election campaigns of political representatives. Thus, I disregard models of direct democracy - whereby citizens would realize true self-rule -, and limit the scope of my research to such models of democracy whereby political power is exercised on behalf of citizens by elected representatives (Manin 1994). Even minimalist conceptions of democracy (e.g. Strömbäck 2005) tend to agree that elections are of crucial importance for such democracies, because it is ultimately through elections and referenda that popular sovereignty can be guaranteed. This, in turn, also means that the media coverage of election campaigns is of key importance, because mediated campaign coverage is expected to be a dominant contributor to the informational basis on which citizens cast their votes.

(Once again, this is not to suggest that the mass media are all-powerful agents of propaganda, controlling citizens like puppets; they, however, are important in setting the scene for interpersonal communication, reflection and opinion formation, by establishing particular grand narrative frames, and directing the attention of citizens to specific issues, topics, ideas and arguments.)

Following this line of thought, it becomes possible to connect abstract, theoretical models to empirically verifiable standards through the following question: given their universal normative requirements, how do different models of democracy expect *constitutive* media to cover the election campaigns of political representatives? I detail my answers to this question in the following chapters, and then proceed to apply the resulting normative criteria to a relevant sample of *constitutive* media covering a particular instance of elections. Finally, I *evaluate* the results: decide whether or not they are acceptable from the point of view of various normative models<sup>15</sup>.

### 3.2. Models of democracy - an overview

The term "democracy" is widely, if not universally, recognized as something desirable. As a label, it generally marks concepts that are *obviously* worthy of support - and, perhaps as a result of the

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<sup>15</sup> "It is essential to emphasize that between operationalization, measurement, and results on the one hand, and conclusions as to satisfaction of [normative] requirements [...] on the other, there lies one further step. At some point it is normally necessary to come to a decision [...] as to whether or not the final results will be considered acceptable." (Westerståhl 1983, p.410.)

positive connotations of the word, it has been used to refer to wildly different political systems. Since the term tends to refer in some way to the principle of self-rule of citizens, its cynical uses (as in the case of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea) are often easy to spot. But even when the term is used in earnest, it can be used as a shorthand for any number of different practical arrangements. Seeing that such is the case, there have been attempts to designate at least a "democratic minimum" - requirements that any political arrangement need to meet so that it could justifiably be called democratic -, but even the designation of such minimal criteria can be difficult - especially in a diachronic perspective (Held 1987). For instance, modern interpretations of democracy consider it fundamentally irreconcilable with slavery - but this was not the case in ancient Greek city states, commonly held to be the birthplace of democratic thought. One interpretation of democracy can be arrived at through the etymological analysis of the term. Such analysis reveals it to be a compound of "demos" (people) and "kratos" (rule); suggesting that it refers to a **form of government** where, unlike in monarchies or aristocracies, **the people rule**. (Held 1987, pp.2–3.)

This short statement encapsulates three principles. Two of these, the principle of **political equality** of citizens, and the principle of **popular sovereignty**, are immediately obvious, while the third, the principle of **individual liberty**, can be discovered when considering the implications of the other two. Notably: if it is the people - the community of equal citizens - that rule, where are the limits of this rule, and to what extent are individual citizens expected to obey the rules set by their communities? The principle of political equality seems to recognize individual liberty and to question it at the same time: no person (a monarch) or a group (the aristocracy) should dictate to others - yet the polity as a whole is expected to impose its decisions on everyone, thereby limiting everyone's individual choices. In other words, democracies necessarily articulate some kind of balance between freedom and equality.

Putting the principles of freedom, equality and popular sovereignty into practice also necessitates certain legal, social, cultural and economic arrangements that actually enable citizens to exercise their democratic rights. A case in point: since people rely on the media in countless aspects of their lives, the success or failure of democracy will to some extent depend on the performance of the media. This thought is the starting point of my dissertation.

But, importantly, criteria of democracy are obviously not exhausted by criteria concerning media performance. One could even argue that what the media do is of minor importance, when compared to the performance of political institutions - for instance, how voting works, or how the political party system functions, or how representatives are supposed to act. Having media that conform to

democratic principles is a necessary, but in itself insufficient ingredient of democracy.

However, it would be way beyond the scope of this dissertation to consider other factors and conditions that might influence the practical realisation of democratic principles.

Thus, focusing on responsibilities of *constitutive* media, my dissertation considers three visions of democracy - three different arrangements for putting the three main principles, described above, into practice. Distilled from previous literature, I label them *liberal-individualist*, *communitarian-republican*, and *deliberative*. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 describe them in detail.

Here I'd like to briefly point out arguments that informed my decision to include not one, but three different models in my analysis; and my decision to include these variants, as opposed to others.

I included three competing visions of democracy in an attempt to broaden the empirical relevance and applicability of this project. I believe that all three considered models make valid, justifiable claims about democracy - even though there are discrepancies between these claims. Instead of privileging one particular interpretation of what democracy is supposed to be, I believe it's more relevant to consider several, alternative options. By asking the question of "what kind of democratic ideals do social news sites approach?", we can potentially learn more than we would by simply asking "do social news sites fit into this one particular variant of democracy?".

The models I chose feature prominently in the research literature (as I demonstrate in their respective chapters; for overviews, see Dahlberg 2001a, 2011), and, perhaps in relation to their popularity among theoreticians, they also have considerable empirical relevance. They are not utopian formulations of impossible standards, but expressions of socio-political arrangements that seem very much feasible. In addition, my choice was also informed by the fact that there are meaningful differences between the models' visions of the media's role in the political process.

Of course, there are numerous alternative ways to conceptualize democracy. I think it important to mention two notable alternatives that I did not include in my analysis, together with my arguments from omitting them - in spite of the considerable attention that they have attracted in academia.

(a) **Direct democracy.** As described in 3.1.2, my study focuses on models of representative, not direct, democracy. I understand direct democracy as true self-rule of a polity: whereby citizens themselves exercise political power, instead of relying on bodies of elected representatives to do so. Following Manin (1994), I understand representation as a *qualitative*, not quantitative concept. This means that political representatives are doing more than simply expressing what the majority view

on a given issue in a given constituency is. Representatives enjoy some autonomy in formulating their positions. They act on behalf of their constituents, but they do not blindly follow the expressed aggregate interests of their voters. In representative democracy, citizens in practice *do not rule themselves* - instead, they entrust their representatives to do so. The theoretical distinction is clear, though in reality, democracies tend to incorporate both direct and indirect elements.

I chose to omit direct democracy from my analysis because I consider it highly unrealistic in contemporary settings (cf. Dahlberg 2011, Pivato 2009). Arguably, it is possible to categorize communitarian and deliberative democracy as direct too, or perhaps a more precise way to say this would be that communitarian and deliberative democracy could also be realized on direct terms. These variants do emphasize the importance of citizens partaking in the political process. But "participatory" democracy does not necessarily mean "direct:" indeed, deliberation is a good example of how discursive political participation is reconcilable with the principle of representation.

(b) **Agonistic democracy.** In recent years, conceptualizations of agonistic democracy have become popular, especially as a counterpoint to deliberative models (Mouffe 2005, Dahlberg & Siapera 2007). Academic relevance could vindicate that I look into such models too. The reason I don't is that I don't find the concept of agonistic democracy convincingly realistic.

Agonistic democracy shares some features with what I call communitarian-republican democracy, but it emphasizes the role of sub-national communities. As members of such communities, citizens are expected to have passionate attachments to different and irreconcilable ideas of the "common" good, and the political system is expected to act as a mechanism that is capable of managing these irreconcilable ideas. This is possible, so the theory goes, once it is realized that politics is ultimately not about finding a solution to social problems that would satisfy everyone, but instead it is about obtaining and exercising power so as to serve the interests of particular communities. There will always be dissent - and this fact should be acknowledged. Pretending that reaching a true consensus is even possible is merely an insidious ideological tool to protect the status quo: if a decision was reached in a so-called consensus, it becomes impossible to assert that said decision is wrong, or not satisfactory for everyone, which would preclude any further discussion. Agonistic democracy suggests steering clear from the idea of consensus, and focusing instead on democracy as a system which theoretically enables every different interest group in society to have a turn in temporarily fixing power relations in its own favour. (Mouffe 2005, Dahlberg 2011, pp.6–9.)

Emphasizing the importance of dissent is a valuable insight. But I don't believe such a model of agonistic democracy could be constructed which advocates and acknowledges perpetual dissent *and*



*at the same time* vouches for a political process that is built on discursive actions. If one takes the thought of agonistic democracy to its logical conclusion, one arrives at questioning the pre-political common ground that allows a discursive exchange of views in the first place. That is, if politics is about designating our adversaries, what framework is there to protect us from starting to treat them as *enemies*, as Carl Schmitt (2007 [1927]) would have it? How is it possible to create a political system accepted by everyone, if we begin with the assumption that consensus - on any political issue - is impossible? How can we have any kind of persistent non-violent political system without any kind of common ground to stand on?

Arguably, deliberative democracy is also threatened by similar theoretical considerations (e.g. how is it possible to deliberate about rules of the deliberation?), but I find those easier to overcome. That said, perhaps a future study could take up the issue of agonistic democracy, and consider how it would expect (social, networked) media to perform.

In the following three chapters I present the models that I use in my analysis. As noted above, my conceptualizations of democracy builds on existing literature - which, however, tends to be riddled with disagreement. Just as there are many different views on what "democracy" means, there are also a plethora of positions on what any particular variant of democracy should entail. For instance, Benjamin Barber's deliberative democracy is quite different to that of the young Habermas - even though there are good reasons to treat them as part of the same theoretical tradition.

In order to dispel the confusion that might arise from such a situation, what I'm offering here are three conceptual models that represent three such theoretical traditions, consolidated or synthesized through my own interpretation. I review important contributions, and on their basis establish my own version of conceptual models.

In presenting these models, I start by establishing basic principles, elaborating on them to a necessary level of detail. I then move on to focus on the role of elections in said models, and thus arrive at general, abstract requirements that each of these models level at the media, regarding their performance of covering election campaigns.

### **3.3. A public sphere perspective**

"Public sphere" is a concept that helps me bridge the gap between theory and practice. It is a concept closely associated with deliberative theory (e.g. Habermas 1989), but I take advantage of its explanatory power also when describing other, non-deliberative ideals of democracy. I do this because I agree with the point that

"[t]he perspective of the [public sphere] is integral to our grasp of media and information in modern societies; it is not simply an extra element one may choose to consider, but is a fundamental dimension essential for organizing our knowledge about the media." (Miège 2010, as summed up by Dahlgren 2012.)

When I refer to the "public sphere perspective," I refer to the fact that public communication does not happen in a vacuum. The public sphere is

"a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. [...] A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body" (Habermas 1997, p.49).

As Habermas later clarified, "forming a public body" can happen in all sorts of ways - formal or informal, arranged and institutionalized or random and haphazard. The public sphere exists *in* interpersonal as well as in mass communication: the abstract public of viewers of a TV show are part of it as well as university debate groups, friends contemplating politics over dinner, or - famously - even audiences of rock concerts (2004, p.374). In a notable departure from *Strukturwandel*, where Habermas divides the societal institution of the public sphere into two cooperating and structurally related domains, the political and the cultural (1989, pp.51–57), in his later works he asserts that it is "*best described as a network* for communicating information and points of view" (2004, p.360, emphasis added). It is in this latter sense that I use the term.

The important implication is that meaningful normative media critique must take communicative context into consideration: we can know what desirable media performance amounts to *only* if we understand how mediated communication is expected to take place in the network of public sphere. Taking a public sphere perspective means remembering that the media are not the only powerful actors in the management of public information, that they have to function in a certain legal, financial and cultural environment over which they might exercise little or no control; and that public communication doesn't end with the publication of information. Perhaps this is trivial, but I still think it's worth emphasizing that the media matter only because they are interacted with - and the scene of that interaction is the public sphere.

In other words, the immediate benefit of using the term "public sphere" is the reminder that meaningful normative criteria regarding the media can only ever be drawn up after considering the contexts, and complex network of actors, in which the media operate. This is true whether we are interested in deliberative or non-deliberative models of democracy. Hence, when describing my conceptual models of democracy, I first establish their visions of the ideal public sphere - and, through these descriptions, I will then be able to arrive at tangible normative criteria.

## Chapter 4. Liberal-individualist democracy

### 4.1. Basic principles

The basic principles of the liberal-individualist tradition of democracy in Western thought can be traced back to the beginning of the Enlightenment - to the works of Locke (1963 [1689]), and his precursor Hobbes (1968 [1651]) - although this latter's solution to the problem of reconciling individual self-centred interests puts too much emphasis on a strong sovereign to be called democratic in a contemporary sense.

The point of departure for liberal-individualist models of democracy is the individual as a rational and autonomous subject; the human being with inalienable rights and self-centred, although not necessarily selfish, interests. One of the rights commonly recognized as fundamental, and of special interest to this paper, is the right to freedom of speech and expression. The media should enable citizens to exercise this right<sup>16</sup>.

Individual subjects are, first and foremost, free. They are also rational in the sense that they are capable of identifying their own interests, of prioritizing them, of expressing them, and of pursuing them. The task of the political process, accordingly, is to reconcile these competing private interests with one another - and with the protection of citizens' inalienable and universal human rights - most importantly, their freedom. Democracy is thus the means to an end: to achieve the greatest liberty for all. (Dahlberg 2001a, Habermas 1996.)

This understanding of liberalism owes a great deal to John Rawls (1996). In his conceptualization, political liberalism is not interested in questions of final values, or the idea of "the good life." It does not propagate a particular view of the world, and it does not explicitly suggest what the common good is. Instead, it accepts, that multiple answers can be given to such questions. There are multiple explanations of what the world is, and what we, humans, ought to do with it - liberalism is only interested in making these various ideologies coexist. To this end, these "comprehensive doctrines" - religious or not, liberal or illiberal, widespread or unpopular - should all respect the democratic essentials of freedom and equality.

Putting this principle into practice is a thorny issue. Subjects are not only free, but they are also *equal* among themselves. Therefore, achieving the greatest liberty *for all* necessarily means curbing every individual citizen's freedom: everyone shall be free, but only to the extent that their freedom

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16 Again, this is not to say that the media are the only responsible actors in making sure that citizens can freely express themselves. The media should operate in an environment where the possibility of free speech is legally and institutionally guaranteed. But examining the legal/institutional requirements of democracy falls well outside the scope of this dissertation, which, consequently, has to rest on the assumption that the environment in which media operate at least entertains the possibility that media could act in a meaningful, constitutive role in democracy.

will not interfere with that of any other citizen. But what constitutes an acceptable level of limiting one's personal freedom? Where are the boundaries of individual freedom, or, to phrase it in yet another way, how to balance the value of liberty with that of equality? (See Mill 2002 [1859], esp. Chapter IV, pp.63-78.)

Various models within the liberal-individualist tradition provide wildly different answers. In fact, based on these answers, disagreement over whether a particular conception of democracy could be labelled liberal can also arise: e.g. consider the debate about Rawls - being called *liberal* by some (Freelon 2010, p.1177), *moderate liberal* by others (Dahlberg 2001a, p.160), and "*liberal*", with quotation marks by others still (Habermas 2004, p.549). Nevertheless, there appears a general and widespread agreement about the principle that the freedom of speech is an inalienable, basic, fundamental right, worthy of protection on its own merits.

But it is also important beyond that. Freedom of speech also has instrumental value, in addition to the intrinsic one (Dworkin 1992, Selznick 1998). To demonstrate this, I turn now to the decision-making mechanism commonly featured in models of the liberal-individualist sort: the *aggregation* of individual opinions, as expressed by votes in elections (Young 2002, Körösényi 2005).

#### **4.2. Freedom of speech as means to an end**

It is supposed that citizens, as individual subjects of democracy, make their minds up in private about a preferred course of political action, and cast their votes accordingly. The aggregation of these votes is the closest we can get to establishing political legitimacy: decisions are considered legitimate because they are in line with the best interests of the majority of citizens.

Some minimalist models are not interested in the quality of the aggregate decisions thus reached, or the way in which individual citizens reach their conclusions before entering the voting booth. So long as the procedure itself is in place, democracy is in a good shape: "procedural democracy does not put any normative demands on citizens that they should vote, should consume news journalism, should participate in public life, or should be well-informed" (Strömbäck 2005, p.334). We know that our subjects are rational and autonomous - and that's enough. They need not be interested in politics, or have any knowledge about it - arguably, it is perfectly rational to think that staying away from politics is very much in the well-founded interest of someone. So long as they *could* participate, or inform themselves about politics, or get engaged in some way, we have reasons to be cheerful for.

In contrast, other models suggest that, individual liberties of citizens notwithstanding, a well-functioning democracy should also include safeguards against an unconsidered "tyranny of majority," or "the supremacy of numbers over knowledge" (Hartley 2008b). Certain variants are

extremely skeptical about the capabilities of human beings. These suggest that it is not, in fact, the citizens in general, but only a select few who run the political show. For such models, public opinion is not the input, but the output of the political process - which, in the end, is little more than a vicious competition for power (Schumpeter 2010 [1942], see also Lippmann 1993 [1927]). According to Körösenyi (2005), such minimalist versions are fundamentally different from other kinds of aggregative models (which either expect citizens to meet certain intellectual or dispositional standards, or are not interested in the subjects themselves at all). I, on the other hand, agree with Mansbridge, who sees liberal-individualist models as very much compatible with the view that regards ordinary folk as detached, or even secondary, in the political process:

"Voters pursue their individual interest by making demands on the political system in proportion to the intensity of their feelings. Politicians, also pursuing their own interests, adopt policies that buy them votes, thus ensuring accountability. In order to stay in office, politicians act like entrepreneurs and brokers, looking for formulas that satisfy as many, and alienate as few, interests as possible. From the interchange between self-interested voters and self-interested brokers emerge decisions that come as close as possible to a balanced aggregation of individual interests." (1980, p.17)

Thus, my conceptualization of the liberal-individualist model shows little interest in the actual intellectual capacities of citizens as voters. The level of political engagement, as well as knowledge about politics is assumed to vary from person to person. Regardless of these varying characteristics, what citizens share is the capacity of discerning their own best interest, and acting on it, by "making demands on the political system in proportion to the intensity of their feelings."

This arrangement, in turn, presupposes the availability of information concerning public matters. On the one hand, citizens (as *voters*) need information as a basis of their private decisions. On the other hand, political *leaders* also need information to be available - as this enables them to appeal to voters, and thus to further their own political interests. It would be hard, if not impossible, to imagine any society which would observe the fundamental principles of democracy *without* information on the *res publica* being generally available. It is a trivial step to connect the availability of information to the freedom of speech: the latter is a necessary, although perhaps not sufficient, condition of the former.

In other words, guaranteeing citizens the freedom of expression is not only important for its own sake, but also because it "helps ensure that maximum information is available for private individuals to make their best possible [...] choices between competing positions" (Dahlberg 2001a, p.160). Given that we are rational and autonomous subjects, knowing more means being able to make better, and more, evaluations of alternative courses of action - which increases the likelihood

of finding the one which would best serve our interests. Therefore, it is desirable that citizens, both as individuals and as representatives of various organizations, are capable of sharing information with one another, with as little interference as possible.

This is hardly a new thought: consider e.g. John Stuart Mill's famous passage on the need for opinions - "right" and "wrong" - to be heard<sup>17</sup> (2002 [1859], p.14). And, naturally, this principle applies to most aspects of life, not only to politics. But in any case, it serves as a point of orientation when trying to establish what the media, as "windows on the world," or at least as key players in making information available, should or should not do.

#### **4.3. The liberal-individualist public sphere**

For liberal-individualist models, the maintenance of freedom of speech is a necessary condition of democracy. It is the state apparatus that is supposed to guarantee, as a guardian, that this freedom of speech is in place. (In general, institutions of the state carry out the task of reconciling competing private freedoms and interests.) But where to draw the line with state intervention?

This problem, subject to considerable disagreement since Locke and Hobbes, is described by Barber (1984, pp.5–20) as the liberal project of reconciling three dispositions: an anarchist one (where individual interests are sacred), a realist one (which recognizes the need for some kind of common ground between citizens, and for an external force to guarantee individual rights), and a minimalist one (which acknowledges the need for a state but tries to limit its interference). The difference between "positive" and "negative" liberties also captures an aspect of the same problem; and it is especially important to cover these concepts here briefly, as they highlight the most important difference between liberal-individualist and communitarian-republican theories of democracy. "Negative" liberties emphasize *freedom from* oppression, and thus highlight the *theoretical* possibility of carrying out an action. "Positive" liberties, in contrast, are understood as *freedom to* do something, in the sense of being empowered to, and *practically* capable of, carrying out an action (Berlin & Hardy 2002). The difference is meaningful, because positive freedoms rely on the active contribution of an entity, such as the state, that would empower the subject.

In line with Barber's "minimalist" disposition, liberalism traditionally understands "liberty as requiring only the absence of certain conditions, typically the absence of coercion" (Christians et al. 2009, p.106). This is hardly surprising: embracing positive liberties is seen as opening the door to exaggerated and unnecessary intervention by the state on individual liberties. (In contrast, communitarian-republican approaches suggest that a positive understanding of liberties is desired.)

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<sup>17</sup> "[...] the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of [any] opinion is, that it is robbing the human race, posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error."

Yet the abstract distinction between negative and positive liberties is not easy to transfer onto practical realities. One man's empowerment might easily be seen as another's intrusion into one's private life.

Concerning the idea of freedom of speech in liberal-individualist democracies, three principles seem thus to emerge. 1.) That it is desirable to have the greatest possible degree of freedom of expression - as this has both intrinsic and instrumental value. 2.) Citizens as individuals, or as representatives of organizations (parties, media organs etc.), should not limit each others' freedom of expression. 3.) The state should guarantee the realization of the previous two principles with as little involvement as possible. In London's phrase, this would lead to the emergence of the "vibrant marketplace of ideas" (1995, p.45).

Graham Murdock (2012, p.53) offers a succinct summary on what these principles imply for the liberal-individualist public sphere:

"Liberal democratic models of mass democracy presupposed universal access to certain basic information and cultural resources: [namely] comprehensive and disinterested *information* on developments that affected their personal and political choices [...], a fair *representation* [for every citizen] in the major media of public culture, and [...] the right to *participation* in open debates over the relative merits of competing explanations of prevailing conditions and rival proposals for change."

Given their central importance for all models of democracy that I discuss, I explore these three resources below.

(a) **Information.** Murdock's perspective on information draws attention to its quality (see also McQuail 2010, p.199). The larger pool of information individual, rational and autonomous subjects have at their disposal, the better equipped they are to make satisfying decisions about the conduct of their lives - *as long as* this information is also "comprehensive" and "disinterested"<sup>18</sup>.

One might also add other criteria. For instance, it seems reasonable to argue that information also needs to be truthful, or at least reliable, as otherwise it would be impossible to base our actions on it. We could also argue that the right to impart information should trump the right to *accurate* information: were we serious about establishing freedom of speech, we should re-conceptualize the role of media and journalism, shifting the burden of responsibility onto the reader: whatever you read, you should be mindful that it is likely to be wrong (Hartley 2008a, Gillmor 2009). The main point here is simply that, as liberal subjects, we need information, and this information *needs to be of a certain quality*. Whatever "a certain quality" means, in practical terms of operationalization,

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<sup>18</sup> "Disinterested" is a word with serious history. Walter Lippmann used this adjective to describe an ideal of journalism, "not recommending neutrality or indifference, but rather a passionate attachment to the honest (open) pursuit of truth despite the risks and obstacles that stand in its way" (Jansen 2008, p.79).

might depend on personal interpretation - as well as on the context. In the case of my dissertation, this particular context is that of the election campaign of political representatives.

The call for information to be publicly available is reflected in the oft-touted conceptualization of the media as a watchdog (Curran 2005). According to this concept, the media are to keep an eye on public officials, as well as businesses, so that they can bring to the public's attention cases where citizens' interests are hurt by abuses of power, corruption, or other kinds of wrongdoing. The media can hold elected representatives, as well as other powerful figures and organizations accountable, through the power of publicity.

This idea of “media as a watchdog” has been subject to considerable critique. Empirical evidence seems to suggest that acting as a watchdog so understood is what the media tend to do least often (ibid). Moreover, some argue that this is not surprising at all, because it is very hard, if not impossible, to distinguish between the disinterested monitoring of public affairs (being a watchdog), and partisan advocacy (being a lapdog of some group) (Christians et al. 2009, pp.139–157).

According to Susan Pharr (1996), the image of court jester or trickster is much more fitting to the media than the image of any kind of a dog: the media are erratic, playful, disorganized, occasionally saying out loud what nobody else can, or wants to; at once serving the status quo and bent on uprooting it.

Such debates about terminology are surely important, as they tend to influence our thinking about the media and their roles, making us susceptible to different aspects of their operation. But the central point for my research here is that the meaningful realization of the free speech principle demands that *information about the performance, and possible wrongdoings, of powerful actors is publicly available*. This guarantees, so far as this is possible, that citizens as private individuals can protect their interests against those wielding more power than they do.

(b) **Representation.** Murdock's dimension of *representation* describes a straightforward idea; although I prefer the term *expression*, in order not to confuse the "informational resource" of being represented in the media with *political* representation (Jensen & Helles 2005). It refers to the right of citizens to have their voices heard. They should be free to express their thoughts and points of view, and they should be able to *represent* them in publicly accessible forms - i.e. in the mass media. This principle emphasises the importance of mediated communication in modern societies.

(c) **Participation.** Finally, the idea of participation draws attention to the importance of a meaningful connection between political decisions about private matters, and public discussion



about these decisions. As mentioned above, certain models of liberal-individualist democracy think it illusory to believe that ordinary citizens could contribute to such decisions in a meaningful manner (or that they would want to). Citizens might think they do so, but they are in fact only proxies in debates scripted by persons and organizations of political power. But even if we suppose that this is the case, it is still important to maintain the possibility of participation in public debates. Public discussions are needed to evaluate alternative courses of action - even if the alternatives themselves are the brainchildren of machinators.

In order for making such participation occur, it is required that the public sphere be *public* – that is, open to everyone, and having eliminated practical barriers which could hinder participation. This is obviously not the sole responsibility of the media, but also that of institutions of the state, and that of civil society too. Dahlgren (2009, pp.102–123) draws attention to the vast number of factors that together could influence what is known as “civic culture” - an expression of which is participation in public discussions.

Information, representation, participation. Speaking about the informational needs of a liberal individualist democracy - is this enough?

McQuail (2010, p.192) reminds us that a conceptualization of liberal individualist democracy might be deficient, if it focuses solely on the above three values, neglecting ones such as the maintenance of social order, or solidarity. Consider also Barber's "realist" disposition of the liberal thought. "It is wonderful to have a lot of high-quality information and an open public sphere at our disposal - but we also need some kind of a common value orientation that holds everything together! How could even the most minimal cooperation among citizens be guaranteed without such an orientation?," a counterargument to liberalism might ask.

Yet in my conceptualization of the liberal-individualist model, these latter values are bracketed. While recognizing the importance of a set of common and shared values, this model argues that the public sphere in general, and the media in particular, should be concerned with probing and questioning these values, always prioritizing the individual and the private before the communal and the public. A liberal-individualist public sphere should give voice to those calling for greater solidarity and a stronger communal background - but it should equally support those who argue to the contrary.

I propose the term "**substantial realization of freedom of expression**" to encapsulate the considerations above. **This is the kernel of the relationship between media and democracy in liberal-individualist models.** Citizens should not only be able to freely express what they want, in

private and in publicly accessible forms, and to obtain information and a wide range of opinions on public matters, but also to meaningfully participate in the debate and information exchange about these issues. The public sphere, in such an arrangement, would consist of a free marketplace of ideas - where "information buyers" are expected to be cautious, and where the freedom of the market is guaranteed by the state.

This is the conceptual background which I rely on in operationalizing the liberal-individualist variant of "media democracy." Admittedly, much of what is written above might sound trivial, uncontroversial, or perhaps - dull. Other democratic traditions also tend to agree with these ideas - even if with different emphases. But other traditions also tend to have additional normative requirements. Their comparison to the baseline of the liberal-individualist variant can serve the purpose of finding out just what those requirements are.

#### **4.4. Media coverage of elections**

Liberal-individualist democracy is a means to the end of realizing the greatest possible freedom for everyone to pursue their own self-centred interests. In its representative variant, two principal mechanisms for reconciling competing interests are elections and referenda; I focus here on the former of these.

One way to describe elections would be to consider them as transactions on the marketplace of ideas. Candidates (sellers) propose various ideas on how to solve political/social problems, on which values should be superior to which other values, and on which person would be best qualified to deal with future problems. Voters (buyers), in turn, decide which set of ideas they consider most helpful in the pursuit of their own interests, and cast their votes accordingly. In such a setting, sellers need exposure - representation -, and buyers need information in order to make the best decision possible. *Constitutive* media, then, are expected to help both buyers and sellers.

In other words, *constitutive* media should make sure that comprehensive and reliable information is available (to whoever seeks it - although, as I suggested above, citizens might well choose to ignore available information as well as to abstain from participation, if they so desire) about the candidates and their respective positions. Candidates with stupid, uncomfortable, unreal, outrageous, disruptive or extremist ideas should be included - so long as their ideas do not oppose the fundamental values of liberalism (individual liberty, political equality, and concomitant basic human rights). And so that elections - the competition on the market of ideas - are fair, it is important that, in principle, *constitutive* media provide every serious candidate with equal opportunities of representation.

## Chapter 5. Communitarian-republican democracy

### 5.1. Basic principles: focus on responsibilities

Some argue that liberal-individualist models fail to capture an essential feature of democracy: that it is necessarily a communal undertaking, one that cannot possibly work without citizens respecting each other beyond the loose boundaries set by liberalism, and one that hinges on the active contribution of citizens. It is comfortable to expect the state to just be there to protect us as autonomous agents; unfortunately, we can only enjoy these benefits if we put some work into it in the first place. The tradition of communitarian-republican democracy is founded upon such convictions.

The "communitarian perspective" (Etzioni 1998a) emphasises the role of the community (as opposed to that of the individual), the importance of the common good (as opposed to private interests), and the responsibilities of citizens (as opposed to their rights)<sup>19</sup>. It considers individual freedom as an important value - but questions the liberal tendency to cast freedom as an absolute value, which should always be championed, without concern for context (Spragens, Jr. 1998). Not only should citizens be protected from one another's liberal excesses, but it is also important that the freedom of individuals does not endanger the existence and healthy operation of the *community*. This, in the final instance, is in the interest of the individual actors, because their individual rights, in their practical manifestation, are the products of democratic social organization.

In other words: rights cannot be realized or maintained without taking on responsibilities. Human beings might, from a philosophical or theoretical point of view, be free and equal from the moment they are born, but in practice, they can only become free and equal through the communities they build with each other. (Consider the difference between negative and positive liberties (4.3.).) Democracy, in the communitarian perspective, is an end in itself.

Hence, the process of political will-formation in communitarian models is public, in contrast to the privacy of liberal-individualist models. This means that citizens should always consider their own best interests from the perspective of the community. In a sense, this is what inevitably will happen anyway - since individual interests cannot be separated from membership in various communities -, but the communitarian perspective also emphasises the need for being in contact, and exchanging information with other fellow citizens. The communitarian perspective does recognize citizens as

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<sup>19</sup> Liberal premises are "overly individualistic, insufficiently sensitive to the social sources of selfhood and obligation, too much concerned with rights and too little with duty, and too ready to accept an anemic conception of the common good. The operative words are overly, insufficiently, too much, too ready. Thus the main target of communitarian criticism is intellectual and practical excess." (Selznick 2002, p.7.)

individuals, with their private rights, self-centred interests and needs of "protected zones of privacy and security"; but it also asserts that they are "socially embedded persons," who are "created, sustained, and sometimes deformed by their social worlds" (Selznick 2002, pp.42–43). It makes little sense to talk about self-referring, self-determining and self-sufficient individuals, because decisive aspects of individual identities, convictions, dispositions and interests stem from the communities of which the individual is member. And this suggests that citizens as individuals have responsibilities to care about these communities<sup>20</sup>.

It is not an accident that "the community" turned into "communities" in the previous paragraph. Individuals are members of *several* communities, spanning from the family to the imagined and abstract community of humanity. Somewhere in between lies the community of a nation, with the formally recognized institutions of the state; but workplaces, voluntary institutions, sports clubs and the like are recognized as communities too, as are groups built on ethnic or religious affiliation. They all overlap and intersect each other through the individuals that simultaneously belong to several of them. In the final instance, principles of communitarianism are "principles that transcend cultures and speak to our common humanity," but: "among these is the federal principle, which prizes diversity, and unity as well. This dual concern is at the heart of communitarian policy" (Selznick 2002, p.50).

Consequently, communitarianism harbours *a multitude of possible tensions* between the various communitarian allegiances of individuals: as a citizen, I ought to act this way, but as member of a religious community, I ought to act in another way - and a third way is suggested by my ethnic background.

There are no hard and fast rules to resolve such tension, apart from the idea that considering the context might help. Yet there is one level at which community seems to be prioritized in key theoreticians' works: **the level of nation state**. This makes sense, since the nation state is the entity which, in Western modernity, currently provides the largest part of the framework for the legal, political, economic and cultural organization of society. It is important that we are members of communities *above* (humanity) and *below* (various sub-national groups) the level of the nation state, but allegiance to these other groups tends to be secondary in importance - at least from the point of

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20 "Of course, citizens must do their work. 'Democracy means paying attention,' Robert Bellah and his colleagues write in *The Good Society*. Information - news and views of what's going on - will aid us in this act. But something else is required: our decision to see ourselves as having public as well as private lives. The informed citizen becomes informed not just by consuming the news but by producing an inner map on which personal experience meets public life, the local greets the national and the global, the immediate joins with distant happenings to draw a wider picture. [...] Unless I seek it, the world in its wider dimension can never be mine." (Rosen 2001, p.293.)

view of democracy, as a political ideal<sup>21</sup>.

It is worth problematizing the concept of "participation" too. For instance, Barber (1984, p.152) stressed the importance of citizens taking part in the *formal* political process. Others, however, have suggested that participation could be understood more broadly:

"[S]ome persons may discharge their community responsibilities by being involved in non-political activities, say, in volunteer work. Just as the polity is but one facet of interdependent social life, so voting and political activity are not the only ways to responsible members of society. A good citizen is involved in a community or communities, but not necessarily active in the polity." (Etzioni 1998a, p.xxxii)

This thought resonates well with the intellectual tradition that tries to extend the realm of the political onto that of the everyday (see e.g. Bakardjieva's "subactivism" (2009)), and to that of popular culture (Dahlgren 2009, pp.136–142, van Zoonen et al. 2010). As in many other cases, communitarianism here demonstrates its cautious and context-sensitive approach: abstract principles are only useful concepts if they are not applied as blind absolutes.

Fortunately, the case of elections provides a framework in which the conceptualization of participation becomes straightforward. Given the importance of elections in granting the political system legitimacy, it is every citizen's responsibility to participate by making an informed decision on the available alternatives, and *casting a vote* accordingly. This is a "communitarian minimum." In addition, participation by taking part in the campaigns is also possible and encouraged - insofar as such participation does not threaten the communitarian-democratic political establishment. Thus, campaigning e.g. by means of suicide bombers is hardly an accepted form of communication.

## 5.2. Clarifications of terminology

An important number of scholars refer to this tradition as "communitarian:" in addition to those already cited, see e.g. Dahlgren (2009), Christians et al. (2009), or Dahlberg (2001a). A loose association of researchers, philosophers, politicians and activists, known as The Communitarian Network (Anon n.d.), also actively promotes its practical realization.

At the same time, others have described something apparently very similar - but referred to it as "republican:" see e.g. Habermas (1996), Drosterij (2007); while Elster (1997) describes a model falling in line with this tradition, but labels it "the forum view" of democracy, instead of using a

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21 According to Fraser (2007), this ideal is tied to a "Westphalian political imaginary;" a paradigm that understands politics as an activity played out in communities that are bound to territorial states. In her view, the presence of de facto transnational public sphere means that this paradigm is of questionable value- yet a convincing alternative has yet to be devised.

one-word shorthand.

I argue that these traditions are in fact one and the same: they describe a model based on the same fundamental ideas - although they might put their emphases elsewhere.

The *communitarian* approach underlines the importance of the common good of solidarity, shared values, cultural cohesion, and the role of the community as a source of identities. The *republican* approach emphasises participation, and citizens' ethical commitment to the realization of a political community. I argue that these two aspects are very closely tied together.

Participation is motivated by being part of an ethical community, based on the recognition that individual rights are the products of communal, democratic organization. But being part of such a community is, by definition, impossible without at least nominal participation.

"[C]ontemporary republicans tend to give [discursive political participation] a communitarian reading," writes Habermas (1996, p.23), criticizing the move "toward an *ethical constriction of political discourse*" (ibid). This move is a mistake, he argues, because political participation doesn't need to be tied to "a hermeneutical process of self-explication of a shared form of life or collective identity" (ibid, p.24). In making this argument, he sets the stage for the deliberative model of democracy as a corrective to the narrow-mindedness of communitarianism - and also implicitly illustrates my point: the communitarian and republican approaches are two sides of the same coin.

However, Habermas' tripartite distinction between liberal, republican and deliberative traditions is not universally accepted. Many consider communitarian models to be deliberative too (e.g. Barber (1984) and Young (2002)). Participation, according to this view, is largely *discursive*: it means that citizens have a responsibility to discuss publicly relevant issues. But just any random kind of discussion won't cut it. Citizens need to *deliberate*: to inform themselves thoroughly, to carefully and respectfully listen to each other (and especially those who happen to disagree with them), and to weigh the various solutions using rational arguments.

However, I believe there are both conceptual-theoretical (a), and practical (b) reasons why this position should not be maintained.

(a) There is an important difference between the deliberative and communitarian traditions with regard to their view on democratic legitimacy, and the task of the political process.

For communitarians, certain values are given, unshakeable absolutes, even if their practical application is context-dependent. Communitarian models rely on a broad, but very strongly articulated framework outlining a given definition of "the common good." In this definition, the

value of solidarity, and the ideal of political participation take centre stage. Democratic decisions are legitimate because they are aimed at realizing this common good (and since participation itself is designated as part of the common good, politics, in a somewhat radical view of communitarianism, could also be seen as "not *about* anything. It is the agonistic display of excellence, or the collective display of solidarity, divorced from decision making and the exercise of influence on events" (Elster 1997, p.26).

In contrast, the non-republican interpretation of deliberative democracy suggests that "all pre-discursive interests and values are up for grabs. A legitimate (and rational) decision rests not upon the expression of pre given-wills but upon the deliberative process by which everyone's will is formed" (Dahlberg 2001a, p.168).

This proposition might spawn its own set of problems<sup>22</sup>. The point, nevertheless, is that this latter understanding of deliberative democracy is wary of pretending to know what the common good is, as expressed in value propositions other than those related to the procedure of the debate. When faced with political problems, we cannot know what the "will of the community" is. But we can establish a process that is going to help us make decisions that are likely to be good for the largest number of citizens. (And, in this process, individual members of the community are also likely to discover and develop their private views - and perhaps even identities.)

According to the non-republican interpretation of deliberative democracy, it might not be necessary for everyone to participate in this deliberation. Deliberation guarantees, so far as this is possible, to find out what the best decision would be in a given case, but the solution found is not the best *because* it was reached through deliberation - but because of its own merits. In the non-republican view, such a best decision could well be imposed by a tyrant, too. That is to say, a good decision will remain a good - if illegitimate - decision regardless of it having been imposed arbitrarily by a supreme ruler. In a less radical example, Fishkin (1997) proposed that it might suffice if a representative sample of the population deliberated. But such arrangements, as well as mediated deliberation through proxies (Friedman 2006), would not meet the communitarian standard. Communitarian-republican models *that also require deliberation* have very little latitude for individual's freedom *from* politics. In contrast, the non-republican interpretation of deliberation accommodates this notion without, so to say, batting an eye.

(b) Some might interpret the difference between deliberative and communitarian-republican models

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<sup>22</sup> For instance: if we have no point of orientation, how would we even be capable of *starting* the debate? (Michelman 1997, see also Gutmann & Thompson 2004). And why exactly would an ideal procedure of debate based on a "mildly transcendental," idealizing premise of human communication create democratic legitimacy? (Jensen 2010, pp.151–156.)

as one of degree, rather than kind. Even so, this still remains an important distinction; and certain practical considerations underline this point. Notably: empirical evidence seems to suggest that deliberation could work *against* participation, and thus a society characterized by high levels of political activism is highly unlikely to also be deliberative (Mutz 2006, Cohen & Fung 2004; cf. Wojcieszak 2009).

The reasons are somewhat uncertain. Yet there is considerable evidence that an important feature of efficient deliberation, being exposed to a wide variety of opinions and information, some of which is incongruent with one's previous beliefs (Manin 2004), is what throws the spanner in the works. Such "cross-cutting exposure" tends to make people more informed about issues, but also more ambivalent and doubtful, making it harder to commit themselves to political action.

Deliberation is *difficult*. It is an intellectually and emotionally trying activity (Baek et al. 2011), that could work against the harmony holding close-knit communities together. Activism is likely to lead to social conflict, especially in an environment where multiple points of view are available (Mutz 2006). "The conflict between deliberation and participation does not [...] reflect a universal law" (Thompson 2008, p.512) - but communitarian deliberation seems to be the amalgam of two ideals that seem to be difficult to reconcile.

Based on the reasons cited above, I consider it reasonable and important to treat communitarian-republican and deliberative models of democracy separately. I now turn to the question of how communitarian models approach the problem of freedom of speech.

### **5.3. Freedom of speech - in context; under tension**

What is obvious from widely quoted communitarian manifestos (Etzioni 1998, Anon n.d., Selznick 2002) is that the freedom of speech and expression is, *formally*, as much valued by this tradition as it is by its liberal counterpart. At the same time, the communitarian tradition also incorporates provisions on how to put the principle into practice - always considering the context:

"The First Amendment [to the American constitution] is as dear to communitarians as it is to libertarians and many other Americans. Suggestions that it should be curbed to bar verbal expressions of racism, sexism, and other slurs seem to us to endanger the essence of the First Amendment, which is most needed when what some people say is disconcerting to some others. However, one should not ignore the victims of such abuse. [...] Many *non-legal measures* are appropriate to express disapproval of hateful expressions and to promote tolerance among members of the polity." (Etzioni 1998a, p.xxxiii), and:

"Certainly, a free society must remain vigilant against [...] attempts to stifle freedom of speech [...]. But it is equally certain that these rights should not be interpreted or applied in such an inane wooden manner as to



render the public domain chaotic and incompetent." (Spragens, Jr. 1998, p.38.)

Thus, a tension inherent in the communitarian ideal surfaces.

This ideal, just like liberalism, recognizes the freedom of speech as something with both intrinsic and instrumental value. This freedom should always be protected for its own sake - as well as for the benefits that it brings to society. We need information to be publicly available, and to be of a certain quality, so that we can achieve large-scale and efficient social coordination, and protect democracy itself. Concerning politics in particular, Selznick argues that:

"democracy calls for robust expression of differing views [...]. In the interests of political freedom, we accept much that is inconvenient, offensive and potentially dangerous. The special context of public discourse tells us that people should be free to speak their minds even if what they say is outrageous or revolutionary." (2002, pp.75–76.)

He is insistent on the importance of accurate, reliable and serious information being publicly available - even if it outrages or threatens to disrupt the community in any other way. If the media are to honour the values of social order and solidarity, these could only be secondary to serving their audience with the truth - however inconvenient, upsetting, boring, or otherwise uncomfortable it might be<sup>23</sup>. This is the position that I referred to as "substantial realization of freedom of speech" (4.3).

*At the same time*, there exists a strand of thought within the communitarian-republican tradition that focuses on the role of *public communication as a forger of communities* - even at the expense of conventionally accepted values such as quality or public relevance. Rodríguez (2011) cites the admittedly extreme, but sadly not infrequent case of civilian communities exposed to armed conflicts. In such a setting, "traditional journalistic news coverage does not have to be the main undertaking of a community news medium," she argues. The quality of the journalistic product can be secondary: what matters is that journalism, as an activity carried out *by and for* members of the community, happens. The mere act helps to preserve trust and resist fear among members of the community, to "re-signify the landscapes of memory," and in general, to help survival in the face of violence and danger, by creating a sense of belonging among members of the community (2011, pp.232–254).

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23 Selznick's argument is, in my opinion, weakened by his reference to an alleged golden age of journalism, free from the domination of liberal capitalist principles, which have lead to "the vast sea of mediocrity" of today's tabloidising journalism (2002, pp.104–105). He suggests that family-owned media enterprises are the last guardians of quality - which, considering the latest shenanigans of Rupert Murdoch's media empire, seems more than a bit ironic.

The same principles should be at work in communities not exposed to physical danger, too. Atton (2003) gives voice to similar ideas: in his view, democracy requires radical, non-mainstream sources of information to be active, and to operate along ideas that openly defy conventions, both on what is newsworthy, and on how those newsworthy things should be covered. "Alternative media" should replace "an ideology of 'objectivity' with that of overt advocacy." Radical, popular styles of reporting have just as much relevance as established, conventional forms<sup>24</sup>. Alternative, advocacy journalism forges alternative communities. Communities that try to defy the homogenizing pressure of the mainstream, and the ideology represented therein.

Costera Meier (2012) stresses the same points. She describes how news can, literally, "hurt:" how the biased, one-dimensional coverage of the mainstream media of particular groups, neighbourhoods or problems affects those involved. "Participatory storytelling," an alternative to traditional, sensation- and deviance-focused journalism, is a way to

"foster individual empowerment and stimulate community participation. The empowering potential of digital storytelling as part of a community-building strategy was also recognized by [other scholars and organizations], particularly for those alienated or otherwise excluded from access to media" (ibid, p.2-3).

"Particularly," but, I would add, not "exclusively." In other words: the mainstream media can *also* be conceived of as a cohesive force in the largest, dominant community in a society. Fjaestad and Holmlöv (1976) stress how journalists, in some cases, understand the concept of neutrality as not only accepting the status quo, but also refraining from covering controversial issues in order to promote local harmony. They wrote with small local communities in mind, but the principle can be extended to cover much more than the confines of a town, a region, or even a country (see Gray 2005, Selznick 2002, p.50). The communitarian-republican tradition expects citizens to be committed to the idea of being part of one ethical community, and this suggests that the national media are expected to promote this idea, and to establish at least a broad common orientation among them. This is an undertaking that is at odds with the disinterested, market-focused objectivity advocated by the liberal position.

In sum: the communitarian-republican model of democracy values the **substantial realization of freedom of speech**. At the same time, it *also* recognizes the role of public communication in

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24 Downing et al. warn that the fuzzy concept of "community" tends normally to be understood as "something good," and thus community journalism is also seen as something good, going back to the original roots of democracy (2003, p.39). But this is not the whole picture. "Community" organizations will promote all sorts of ideologies, from the radically progressive to the radically conservative, in all shades of the ideological spectrum (Downey 2007). "Grassroots organizations" might promote fair trade as well as fascism - which should be taken into consideration when considering the application of the free speech principle in a given scenario.

**forging and maintaining communities** - local, national, and perhaps even global. In spite of a functional differentiation within the media system - some media organs shall focus on this, others on that; *constitutive* media should do this, *non-constitutive* media should do that -, these aspirations may sometimes at odds with each other. Instead of prioritizing one unconditionally over the other, communitarianism suggests that, when in conflict, they are to be reconciled through the careful analysis of the practical context.

#### **5.4. The communitarian public sphere**

The communitarian ideal of the public sphere differs from liberalism's free marketplace of ideas. To wit, it extends that ideal with an ethical dimension. (Political) participation in the life of the community is not a neutral value: citizens *should* participate, and, consequently, the public sphere should enable and encourage participation, the creation and maintenance of social connections, and the bonding of citizens in a meaningful community of shared responsibility.

This idea parallels the Aristotelian view of politics as part of the “good life,” lived to the fullest; and it is arguably this thought that is reflected in the concept of the public sphere as a “forum” (more precisely: agora), as opposed to being a mere marketplace of ideas (Elster 1997).

#### **5.5. Media coverage of elections**

*Constitutive* media in communitarian democracy should cover election campaigns so as to provide citizens with comprehensive, diverse and reliable information, on the basis of which a responsible decision can be made. At the same time, *constitutive* media should also emphasize the importance of such events, the responsibility of citizens in taking part, and the community ties that such responsibility stems from. Recognizing these ties also enables citizens to accept the outcome of elections that they perceive as lost: regardless of who's in charge, what's most important for democracy is the continued existence of the ethical-political community that empowers its citizens. However, as suggested above, limits of encouraged participation should be drawn in a manner reconcilable with the fundamental democratic value of *individual* freedom.

## Chapter 6. Deliberative democracy

### 6.1. Basic principles: deliberation as political legitimation

Deliberative democracy has been a fashionable topic among theoreticians for decades, and the emergence of new media and communication technologies has in all likelihood contributed to maintaining this interest. New technology, especially the internet, seems to solve many practical problems that deliberative theory must overcome. For an overview of various deliberative theories, see e.g. Dahlberg (2007), Bohman and Rehg (1997), Saward (2001) or Cohen & Fung (2004). Given the amount of contributions to deliberative theory, the picture is fuzzy at best. There are important differences between different strands advocated by different scholars. Yet there is some important common ground, too.

"Deliberative democracy, broadly defined, is [...] any one of a family of views according to which the public deliberation of free and equal citizens is the core of legitimate political decision making and self-government."  
(Bohman 1998, p.401.)

In this chapter, I present some of the members of this "family of views," and establish one particular interpretation as the model that I am going to use in this project.

Liberal-individualist models view politics as a marketplace of ideas; communitarian-republican versions view it as a forum where citizens, sharing an ethical commitment to participating in public affairs, can realize some pre-defined concept of the common good. The deliberative model stands between these two positions.

Its orientation towards politics in general, and to the role of the state in particular, is similar to that of liberalism. It does not come equipped with a pre-defined idea of the good life - which would, for instance, involve solidarity or political participation. Political institutions are in place to act as guardians over citizens' interests, even if some of these citizens are not interested in politics. The existence of political institutions does not require that citizens understand themselves as parts in a social whole with a strong and universal concept of the common good.

At the same time, the deliberative concept agrees with the communitarian idea in rejecting liberal privatism in the political process. Democracy that is based on the unreflected aggregation of expressed private views - Barber (1997) calls this plebiscitary democracy - is a crippled and flawed system. There are no good reasons for citizens to accept such decisions which only express the *unreflected* aggregation of private interests; in other words: such decisions can hardly be legitimate.

This is because citizens can only develop and recognize their own interests through deliberation: through having qualified conversations with other, real and imaginary members of the public, and thereby gaining an intersubjective understanding of the state of things, of the problems they face, and of the potential solutions to these problems.

In the words of Manin, it is "the *process* by which everyone's will is formed that confers its legitimacy to the outcome, rather than the sum of already formed wills" (1987, p.352), emphasis added)<sup>25</sup>.

As deliberative democrats, we cannot know, unlike republicans, what universal goals we should be striving for. But in the form of deliberation, we have a process that brings us closer to the best possible decisions every time we have to decide. Deliberation, then, could be understood as a **weakly defined concept of the common good**, and thus "the success of deliberative politics depends [...] on the institutionalization of the corresponding procedures and conditions of communication" (Habermas 2004, p.298).

The procedural correctness of deliberative democracy creates legitimacy in two ways (Estlund 1997).

First, it guarantees that deliberative decisions are going to be *fair* and *just*: considering the interests of everyone as free and equal subjects - even if not every single person can, or wants to, actively participate in the actual discussion. In the liberal-individualist tradition of aggregating votes, there is no such guarantee, with decisions excluding many, and easily leading to the tyranny of majorities. It is important to note here that aggregation does play a complementary role in the deliberative process as well. We can only deliberate for so long before making decisions, and when deliberation time is up, practical constraints compel us to aggregate individual views. The point is that deliberative theory is interested in what happens *before* the votes are cast.

Second, it also proposes that deliberative decisions are going to be *correct*, or at least *better than the alternatives* - as measured by standards *other than those related to the actual procedure itself*. This might sound like a problematic claim; and it is sometimes ignored, opening the way to the devastating critique of deliberative theory (e.g. Mutz 2008). It might sound problematic, or even paradoxical, for the following reason: deliberative democracy seems to have only one standard of measurement - and this is related to the procedure itself. How is it possible, then, to make sense of the claim that it is expected to lead to good decisions? How is it possible to declare a certain

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25 Manin also stresses that *everyone* should participate in deliberation - an idea which I don't agree with. Nevertheless, he sums up the principle at the heart of deliberative democracy succinctly.

decision "good," if all we have is procedural standards? And if procedurally correct deliberation is the guarantee of good decisions, how is it possible to decide what actually counts as procedurally correct? (See also Michelman 1997.)

This is the Achilles-heel of deliberative theory, but I believe this paradox can be solved once it is recognized that procedural correctness cannot be fully independent of non-procedural values. As I argued above, procedural correctness can, and also should, be regarded as an implied expression of a weak concept of the common good: some basic ideas about what democracy ought to be. No theory of democracy can exist without such value orientations<sup>26</sup>.

In the case of deliberative democracy, these value orientations suggest that the role of politics is to secure the peaceful and harmonious coexistence of individuals, who are by nature free and equal, regardless of their professed values, cultures, abilities, personal preferences or practical circumstances. Their coexistence requires the peaceful resolution of social problems that arise from the many differences between individual citizens. And these problems are best resolved when treated as problems with an intellectual, cognitive dimension. From this perspective, various socio-political arrangements can be seen as problem-solving mechanisms; and, out of all these mechanisms, deliberative democracy is the most efficient one.

According to Hilary Putnam (1992), this idea could be traced back to the pragmatist philosophy of Dewey. Putnam argues that Dewey, although never having made the explicit claim himself, brought together all the ingredients for the argument that

"[... d]emocracy is not just one form of social life among other workable forms of social life; it is the precondition for the full application of intelligence to the solution of social problems." (ibid, p. 180).

This is an interesting and debatable argument, which I cannot explore in full detail here (but see Westbrook's (1998) analysis). But whether or not Putnam is right in crediting Dewey with the idea, I agree with the thought that deliberative democracy should consider politics a problem-solving activity. Doing so renders it possible to link the procedure-independent quality of decisions to standards of a procedure: as argued in 5.2, decisions are not good *because* they were found through deliberation, but because they provide good solutions to social problems. Deliberation, simply, is a process that makes it likelier to find good decisions than any other procedure we know of. Obviously, one could reject the position that politics could be seen as a problem-solving activity, involving first and foremost the "application of intelligence to social problems." (For instance, Malmberg (2012, personal communication) argued that such a view is too narrow, because it

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<sup>26</sup> The same is true for the liberal tradition too: only its own concept of the common good is that it is best left to the individual discretion of private citizens.

ignores the dimension of power<sup>27</sup>.) One could also reject the point that, even if politics is about solving problems, deliberation would produce better results than alternatives. If one does so, one would have no compelling reason to support the idea of deliberative democracy.

It is noteworthy that the model of deliberative democracy does *not* argue that deliberation is the *only* way to reach good decisions. It is theoretically conceivable that a single person of supreme intelligence and benevolence could outperform deliberative assemblies. Consider Habermas' principle informing his model of deliberative democracy:

"Just those action norms are valid to which all possibly affected persons *could* agree as participants in rational discourses." (2004, p.107.)

This principle doesn't explicitly say that such "action norms" can only be found through deliberation that would involve every citizen, or even every "affected person." However, there *is* an intuitive, commonsensical link between the number of persons involved in deliberation, and the merits of the outcome. Namely, deliberative theory assumes that the more people are involved in the problem-solving process of politics, the *likelier* it is that good solutions will be found. This is because increasing the number of participants increases both the pool of potential solutions, and the likelihood that those potential solutions are going to be thoroughly evaluated and filtered.

Thus, if one accepts the premise that the task of politics is to solve social problems, and that these problems are in the final instance practical problems that can be solved through the application of intelligence, then there are good arguments for also accepting the claim that deliberative democracy, in principle, is going to be more efficient than alternative solutions, such as a benevolent tyrant, or a system whereby every citizen would rule for one day, or one which is based on the aggregation of unreflected views of citizens (Estlund 1997).

Of course, "in principle" is a very important qualification in the previous sentence. As I explain in 5.2, there are strong arguments against the case of fully deliberative societies: having every citizen deliberate would be practically impossible; and, since deliberation tends to correlate with decreased political activism, perhaps even counterproductive. Supporters of such participatory-deliberative regimes are not always up to scratch in addressing such concerns (Friedman 2006, Downing et al. 2003, p.48). (Pivato's (2009) pyramidal model of democracy uses a simple principle to bridge the

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27 I disagree with this point. I believe the Deweyian argument for deliberative democracy does not eliminate the dimension of power, it merely suggests that power struggles, as well as the application, redistribution, and challenge of power are all activities that involve a practical dimension: practical problems that can best be solved through treating them as intellectual challenges. Such a management of the practical problems does not eliminate fundamental disagreements e.g. about values.

gap between small-scale, face-to-face deliberation and the involvement of everyone; but his model is as utopian as it is interesting.) The concept of **mediated deliberation**, however, offers a workable solution (Cohen & Fung 2004, Wessler 2008, p.1).

In mediated deliberation, it is the job of professional communicators to "not only help policy experts communicate with each other, but also [to] assemble, explain, debate, and disseminate the best available information and ideas about public policy, in ways that are accessible to large audiences of ordinary citizens" (Page 1996, p.5). Citizens must not be passive or ignorant, but we shouldn't expect them to participate in *direct* deliberation either - as this would be practically impossible. Instead, they should be rendered capable of taking part in the deliberative political process through "mediated public connections" (Couldry et al. 2010). The ideal of mediated deliberation is an ideal of division of labour: between experts (meaning politicians as well as experts of various fields, in the first sense of the word), professional communicators (including the media), and citizens as sources of opinion<sup>28</sup>.

The conceptual model of democracy that I use in this project embraces the idea of mediated deliberation based on societal division of labour. I now try to explore this idea in detail.

## 6.2. The deliberative public sphere

My interpretation of the deliberative model owes a great deal to the concept that Habermas (2004) refers to as "two-track" democracy. In this model, Habermas divides the political decision-making mechanism in a society into a **core** and a **periphery**. The core refers to the institutionally organized political system, while the periphery to the "open and inclusive network of overlapping, subcultural publics having fluid temporal, social and substantive boundaries [...]; a "wild" complex that resists organization as a whole" (ibid, 307). In the cooperation of core and periphery, deliberation is the responsibility of the former:

"[...] I would like to understand the procedure from which procedurally correct decisions draw their legitimacy [...] as the core structure in a separate, constitutionally organized political system, *but not as a model for all social institutions* (and not even for all government institutions). If deliberative politics is supposed to be inflated into a structure shaping the totality of society, then the discursive mode of sociation expected in the *legal system* would have to expand into a self-organization of *society* and penetrate the latter's complexity as a whole. This is impossible, for the simple reason that democratic procedure must be embedded in contexts it cannot itself regulate." (ibid, 305)

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28 On the merits of such a division of labour, see also Bobbio (2010).



The periphery, accordingly, is largely detached from actual political decision-making, and it is **not deliberately organized**. It refers to the everyday life of citizens as individuals and as members of voluntary associations (political and other). It is in this periphery that citizens develop their identities and opinions, private and public, through taking part in the wild and unorganized flows of communication (again: public and private, mass and interpersonal, mediated and unmediated) that permeate society.

The distinction between the core and the periphery reflects differences in political power, not in socio-economic status, even though these two might naturally correspond. The periphery consists of everyone outside the formal political core; thus it includes elites and non-elites too; citizens from all possible walks of life. Its diversity is one of its fundamental features.

The political public sphere stands (or rather: *happens*) between the core and the periphery (ibid, p.373), at the interplay of formal political procedures with informal, unorganized opinion-formation.

In contrast to his earliest works on the public sphere, in the two-track deliberative model, Habermas does not consider it an institution in any strict sense of the word. Instead, it is a network: a complex, entangled whole of streams of communication with their various publics (2004, p.360, Dahlgren 2009, p.73). Meaningful opinion-formation and informed discourse are no longer confined to specific cultural settings, such as the literary saloons of 18th-century Paris. The audience of a rock concert (!) is just as much part of the public sphere as the abstract public constituted by readers of a given newspaper or viewers of a television show. Despite their differences, and conscious attempts at exclusion notwithstanding:

"all the partial publics constituted by ordinary language remain porous to one another. The one text of "the" public sphere, a text continually extrapolated and extending radially in all directions, is divided by internal boundaries into arbitrarily small texts for which everything else is context; yet one can always build hermeneutical bridges from one text to the next." (Habermas 2004, p.374.)

This complex of the **political public sphere has a dual role**. On the one hand, it mediates between the core and the periphery - in both directions. From the core to the periphery, it is, naturally, an important source of information, as well as a sphere of representation (Trenz 2009). In the other direction, it acts as a sensory apparatus: it draws the attention of the core to the conditions on the periphery, revealing societal problems and suggesting solutions to deal with them<sup>29</sup>.

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29 "[...] the public sphere is a warning system with sensors that, though unspecialized, are sensitive through society. From the perspective of democratic theory, the public sphere must, in addition, amplify the pressure of problems,

On the other hand, it is also a sphere of reflection (Habermas 2006, p.418). By definition, it is in the political arenas of the public sphere that citizens, both in their capacity as individuals and as members of various communities, come to an understanding of their own views, refine or change them. This reflexivity is achieved through being in contact with other citizens, directly or with the help of various media, as members of various publics. And it is aided by the traditional organization of mass communication, with a strong differentiation between producers of content and members of the audience, because being a contemplative spectator means having more distance from the subject matter - which in turn allows for improved reflection (Malmberg 2010). Mass media - in Jensen's expression: "institutions-to-think-with" (2010, p.104) - are unsurpassed enablers of reflection.

Thus, **in deliberative politics, the core and the periphery work in tandem connected through the political public sphere.** The unorganized flows of communication of "weak publics" (weak as they don't have direct political power) act as sensors: based on the lived, everyday experiences of citizens, they make various social problems public. The public sphere thematizes, filters and organizes public opinion, and, based on the information and opinion thus becoming available, the political core makes decisions following a supposedly ideal deliberative procedure.

This arrangement resonates well with Polletta, Chen and Anderson's concept of deliberation, which is based on two consecutive stages. The first of these is labelled "divergent," and its task is to make the available pool of opinion as large as possible. The second one is the "convergent" stage, which focuses on filtering and organizing the opinions gathered. (Polletta et al. 2009.)

Given this arrangement, the task of deliberative theory is also two-fold. First, it should set up a criterion to judge the ideal process that is to be followed by the political core in its deliberations (for an example, see Steiner et al. 2005). Second, it should also evaluate the performance of the public sphere - with a special attention to the media as its dominant organizers.

My project does not take up the first of these issues (admittedly, Habermas himself could be criticised for not showing much interest in what's going on inside the black box of institutionalized politics). Instead, I will focus on the second problem - through the lens of social news sites.

## **6.2. Freedom of speech - and normative constraints**

It is clear that, for the deliberative model, the public sphere should be open, in the sense of accessible to everyone. Otherwise, both of its core functions - mediation between the core and the periphery, and being a sphere of reflection - would be compromised. The hallmark of everyday

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that is, not only detect and identify the problems but also convincingly and *influentially* thematize them, furnish them with possible solutions, and dramatize them in such a way that they are taken up and dealt with by parliamentary complexes." (Habermas 2004, p.359, see also Bendor et al. 2012, pp.68–69.)

communication flows that generate communicative power is that they should be *free and unorganized*, resisting unruly influences of power; and the same should also apply to the various media organs that play a key role in filtering and organizing these flows of communication. This openness can be characterized as the substantial realization of the freedom of speech, reflecting citizens' fundamental rights to information, public expression, and participation in debates about public matters.

At the same time, it is also clear that the public sphere should also filter all the available contributions, and that this filtering should be based on a strong normative commitment. Everyone should be able to bring issues, information and opinion to the public, and to discuss about these with others - but not all streams of communication are worthy of attention to an equal degree<sup>30</sup>. As Habermas writes: "To put it in a nutshell, the deliberative model expects the political public sphere to ensure the formation of a plurality of considered [in the German original: "reflected-upon"] public opinions" (2006, p.416).

Here, **"a plurality of"** is as important as **"considered."**

What makes public opinion "considered"? There do not seem to be hard and fast, context-independent rules on deciding that. Habermas himself suggests that "*relevant* issues [should be] discussed, with all the *required* information, mobilizing *appropriate* contributions" (2006, p.418), but these are still abstract requirements, tacit about the most important questions of *what* is important, *what* is required, and *what* is appropriate. In the absence of a clear baseline orientation, the deliberative perspective must provide answers on a case-by-case basis, in light of the arguments proposed.

However, what is implied by this particular conceptualization of the political public sphere, is that "considered" opinions are ones that were crystallized in widespread societal debate. This would suggest their perceived relevance, as well as the fact that ample arguments have tested their strength. Manin (2004) underlines how important it is not only to have different, but also *contradictory* arguments in a debate: only this allows the thorough, fundamental and appropriate evaluation of any given proposition (see also Wilhelm 2000, p.87). In order for such tried-and-tested positions to become public, the media should be effectively independent - of the influence of political, economic or social power -, *and* the various publics on the political periphery should be willing to take up the task of giving feedback, discussing about public matters, and in general: being reflective.

Habermas is adamant about the importance of "quality media" in this process:

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30 On competing interpretations of egalitarianism in the deliberative public sphere, see Wessler (2008, pp.3–4).

"the mass media ought to understand themselves as the mandatory of an enlightened public whose willingness to learn and capacity for criticism they at once presuppose, demand, and reinforce; like the judiciary, they ought to preserve their *independence* from political and social pressure; they ought to be *receptive* to the public's concerns and proposals, take up these issues and contributions *impartially*, augment *criticisms*, and *confront* the political process with articulate demands for legitimation" (2004, p.378).

In the deliberative model, the task of the media is as complex as it is important - especially in the case of elections and referendums, where the communicative power of citizens is directly translated into political power, with the core organs of institutionalized politics only playing a comparatively minor role. In these cases, the media, as dominant organizers of the public sphere, have key responsibility in making sure that voters reflect upon their choices before entering the voting booth. (This view is of course not exclusive to the two-track model, but a simple corollary of accepting the legitimacy of mediated deliberation (Page & Shapiro 1992).) Thus, Habermas' insistence on high standards of quality for the mass media is hardly surprising<sup>31</sup>.

At the same time, even though he downplays the role that non-serious, alternative, online media could play in making the public sphere function properly, his networked concept of public sphere opens up the possibility of a division of labour within the media system as well. Some media - including, presumably, at least some of those with the largest social clout - could be in charge of the unsavoury task of paving the way for procedurally correct deliberation, of keeping an eye on the political core, and of making sure that no opinion can become truly public without reflection. At the same time, other media organs need not concern themselves with such tasks; yet others might experiment with new forms of discussion, or bringing new topics to the table; all of them contributing in some manner to the heterogeneous but intelligible complex of "the public sphere" - its cultural or political domains. This idea echoes Etzioni's (1999) and Curran's (2005) point: in order for normative considerations to be empirically applicable, blanket approaches, blind to the context, should be avoided. This is precisely how my conceptualization of deliberative democracy envisages the media.

#### **6.4. Media coverage of elections**

Deliberative democracy considers the substantial realization of freedom of speech a fundamentally important task. In comparison to communitarian-republican models, it attaches less importance to values such as solidarity, social order or political participation: it provides its subjects with freedom

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31 In turn, Bennett et al. (2004) note that the media might fail to live up to such high standards, due to the (perceived) tensions that arise between deliberative values, and traditional values served in producing news for sale. See also Xenos (2008).

from politics, and, importantly, opens up the way to *speculative* participation: taking part in public discussion about what the best course of action to take would be. This participation is not tied to a strong commitment to an ethical community.

On the other hand, the deliberative model imposes stronger normative constraints on the public sphere than liberal-individualist models do. *The political public sphere should "ensure the formation of a plurality of considered opinions."* As the dominant organizers of the political public sphere, the media have particular responsibilities in this; and in order to carry these out, they need to be independent of external power, and committed to the idea of reflexivity, as the key element in the process of citizens developing their identities and preferences. Finally, some *constitutive* media organs should exercise normatively informed choices, and act as bastions of considered opinion. This is especially important in the case of elections for a reason detailed below.

Elections pose a special problem for the two-track model I described above. These are such events where the communicatively generated power of citizens is *directly* translated into political power, without going through the deliberations of the political core. There is no single body in the political core that, after considering the carefully developed views of the citizenry, deliberates about the number of votes each candidate should receive. Once votes are counted, there is no need or space for further deliberation. Elections are events where *aggregation takes precedence over deliberation*. (This is no different in the current electoral system in the US, where the formal decision of electing a federal chief executive rests with the electoral college. The electoral college is *not* a deliberative body.)

The role of the political core is not negligible in this case, but it is confined to preparing, as opposed to actually making, the decision. Logically, then, **it is responsible actors of the political public sphere who have to make sure that the decision made will approximate the deliberative ideal.** In my interpretation of the model, this state of things suggests that *constitutive* media organs, and at least *some* of the powerful actors in the public sphere should enable and facilitate citizens' public deliberation: open and inclusive debate, where a comprehensive range of issue positions are evaluated on the basis of arguments, so that participants are able to familiarize themselves with the alternatives on the table, and to reach, at the very least, an understanding of *their own* views. (As I show in subsequent chapters, social news sites have the potential to become ideal settings for such deliberation to take place.)

What I refer to as "citizens' public deliberation" above is qualitatively different to the institutionalized deliberation that is supposed to take place in the political core. As I argued before,

the two-track model of deliberative democracy envisages a societal division of labour, where procedurally correct deliberation is the task of the political core. Citizens' deliberation in the public sphere is an informal, uninstitutionalized, large-scale process, whose modest, but realistic, goal is to identify considered strands of opinion that could serve as a legitimate basis for decision-making.

In order to set up criteria of considered opinion in the particular context of elections, it is useful to consider them from the problem-solving perspective that I associate with the deliberative model.

In this perspective, the fundamental problem of elections comes down to three questions.

First: what problems are we as a society facing right now? Second what problems are we anticipating for the future? And third: which political party, and/or which individual politician, is best suited to deal with the problems identified?

Of course, these questions invite several others - for instance, what qualities should we look for in candidates?, and how to measure these?; but I believe they offer a good starting point for the evaluation of media performance.

*Constitutive* media, then, ought to help us decide by supplying a wide range of diverse opinions on the questions above, as well as reliable information that could serve as a basis for formulating arguments for and against the various opinions. They should both act as *advocates*, *hosts*, and as *moderators* to an *open and inclusive debate* where citizens - not affiliated with the media or with the political core - are able to formulate their views, and have them represented in public.

*Constitutive* media should prioritize among potential topics to cover, in order to make sure that coverage provides citizens with a good basis for answering the questions detailed above. And finally, coverage should also be reflexive, in two ways: in the sense of critically engaging with proposed solutions.

### **6.5. Rationality in deliberation**

Throughout this discussion of the deliberative version of democracy, I tried to refrain from discussions of rationality. I am writing about "arguments," good and bad, but not necessarily rational. Given how much I build on Habermas' ideas, this might seem surprising. In the last part of this chapter, I try to clarify my understanding of his concept of communicative rationality in deliberative democracy - as well as the reasons for my rejection of this concept.

Two related arguments against Habermas' idea of deliberative democracy are that a.) it is based on a particular and limited understanding of rationality, and b.) for this reason, his version of democracy is based on exclusion - excluding all who are unwilling and/or unable to conduct discussions

according to his demanding standards of rationality. (Young 2002, Aune 2007, Sanders 1997).

It is hard not to agree with some of the criticism. Procedural correctness suggests that there is one particular kind of deliberation that should be followed (at least in the political core). You are free to participate in the debate so long as you play by the rules; democracy goes only so far in accepting the contribution of everyone.

On the other hand, it is equally hard to see how the radical inclusion advocated by Sanders and Young could be practically achieved. So long as we agree to resolve conflicts without recourse to violence, and with some orientation towards freedom and equality *of all*, there will always be need for some communicative common ground, or pre-political rationality - signifying some kind of *belief in arguments* (in whichever form they are made), instead of violent actions. Perhaps politics should not be about discussion and debate but about identity and the public expression of personal "testimony" - but this particular concept of democracy would just as well require some limits to be drawn. Democracy can never be all-inclusive in the sense of protecting every single activity or expression that humans are capable of; it must always define its own limits.

Habermas seems to offer a paradoxical answer to this challenge.

On the one hand, he seems to define the limits of democratically acceptable communication in a lenient, permissive manner. For instance, he is clear that rationality could manifest not only in the cognitive, but also in the affective domain (1997, pp.8–42). Acting in a particular way because of a particular feeling is perfectly rational. Expressions of honest emotions can be considered rational arguments<sup>32</sup>, even though they might not be very strong (for Habermas: "justified") arguments, given that it's difficult to generalize them, as they refer to the claimant's personal emotions.

On the other hand, what seems to make such a broad understanding of rationality possible in the first place is Habermas' belief that whenever we communicate, we *cannot not be rational* in some fundamental sense. The universal human capacity of communication carries with it a kernel of rationality that in principle always enables us to understand one another - even if, in practice, such attempts are thwarted by various reasons (Habermas 2005, p.385). All humans stand on some pre-political common ground that is established by the simple fact that we can communicate.

But the existence of such communicative rationality is a highly debatable idea.

According to Jensen (2010, pp.151–156), Habermas makes the strategic mistake of confusing how

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32 "Rationality is [...] a disposition [...] expressed in modes of behavior for which there are good reasons or grounds. This means that rational expressions admit of objective evaluation. This is true of all symbolic expressions that are, at least implicitly, connected with validity claims" (Habermas 1997, p.22). These "validity claims" are, in the case of expressions revealing one's feelings, about the truthfulness or sincerity of the expressed feelings (cf. the case of cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical or aesthetic-evaluative expressions).

we, as human beings, *should* communicate with how we *actually do*. Thus, his theory of communicative action is built on a woefully inaccurate representation of human beings, supported by the strategic misreading of his key sources, notably Austin's speech act theory.

In contrast, the way I myself would formulate the problem is that Habermas is only partly right. He is right about there being a universal, fundamental communicative common ground, expressed in our capacity of communication, that connects every individual human being. But he is wrong in viewing this pre-political common ground as sufficient to guarantee meaningful intersubjective understanding. Being able to recognize one another's attempts at communication is a far cry from being able to understand what is actually being said, or sharing even the most trivial notions about what should constitute cooperation, or what values this cooperation should be based on.

However, my point is this: I believe that one can reject the idea of communicative rationality while still accepting a model of deliberative democracy.

For Habermas, communicative rationality *guarantees* that deliberative democracy can in theory work (subject to practical restraints). Only those norms are labelled valid that everyone could agree on - and, says Habermas, *because of the underlying concept of communicative rationality*, we can be sure that such an agreement can at least in theory be reached. But it is possible to replace this underlying framework with another counterfactual condition.

For instance, we might argue that "only those norms are valid to which everyone could agree in the counterfactual case of being able to debate infinitely long" (Jensen, personal consultation, 2011). Now, such an assertion would still not guarantee an agreement: it might turn out that some of our chosen values are just irreconcilable. But just because general agreement about everything (or even *anything*) is an unattainable ideal, we need not abandon trying to *approximate* that ideal: to attain it *to the extent that this is possible*. Fundamental values of democracy (freedom and equality) suggest that, all other things being equal, decisions that satisfy *more* people are better than those which satisfy *fewer* people, and this is precisely what procedurally correct deliberation promises to deliver.

With these considerations in mind, I chose to base my conceptualization of deliberative democracy on Habermas' "two-track" model, as described above. I believe that, once we separate the model itself from the underlying concept of communicative rationality, this turns out to be quite permissive, lenient, practically applicable and thus empirically relevant model - which at the same time remains firmly embedded in the normative domain.



## Chapter 7. Models of democracy - a summary

The following table sums up the main differences between the three models of democracy used in my study.

	Liberal-individualist democracy	Communitarian-republican democracy	Deliberative democracy
View of the subject as citizen	autonomous, self-interested individuals whose rights demand protection	autonomous individuals deeply embedded in communities, whose responsibilities are the source of their rights	autonomous, self-interested individuals who develop their interests (and identities) through discursive contact with others (yet maintaining this contact is not an ethical imperative)
Is actual political participation important?	not important	very important; participation is part of the good life	important, but it is not an ethical imperative
Idea of “the common good”	Pluralism. There is no single “common good” apart from what guarantees the coexistence of free and equal private individuals, and their different ideas about the world.	Community. The most important goal of democracy is to maintain the community itself (on various levels; a community of communities) => hence the importance of solidarity, responsibility of participation.	Good decisions. It is impossible to know what any reasonable “common good” is, so we have to stick to an ideal political process which promises to find it in every case. This process is deliberation.
Legitimacy achieved through....	aggregating individual preferences	involving everyone in the political process, committed to the same idea of the common good	the deliberative process
View of the political public sphere	a free marketplace of ideas	ambivalent: a sphere of forging and maintaining community ties - as well as a free marketplace of ideas, and inconvenient truths	a sphere of filtering and organizing communication flows to ensure the plurality of considered public opinion
Constitutive media election coverage...	...should make sure that <i>comprehensive</i> and <i>reliable</i> information is available on all options. Participating candidates, parties, and their ideas should have equal opportunity of representation.	...should emphasize the importance of the event, enable and encourage responsible civic participation - as well as providing comprehensive and reliable information about the choices on offer.	...should supply citizens with a wide range of diverse information, opinions and arguments on: 1.) what problems society is facing right now, 2.) what problems are anticipated for the future, and 3.) which candidate would be best suited for dealing with these problems. Constitutive media should be open to the contributions of citizens; and they should be reflexive: critically engaging with their subject material. They should also enable and facilitate public deliberation.

Table 1. Models of democracy

## Part III. Methods

In the previous chapters, I outlined three visions of democracy, and three sets of general criteria regarding the expected performance of constitutive media covering election campaigns. I now translate those general, abstract criteria to empirically measurable standards that can be applied in a specific context: that of social news sites. I do this by taking advantage of an analytical framework proposed by Peter Dahlgren, which utilizes a public sphere perspective.

### Chapter 8. Analytical framework

As explained in Chapter 3.3, I use the term "public sphere" in a broad sense, to refer to networked instances of communication, everyday and informal as well as official and formal, that revolve around public matters. Thus the public sphere *happens* rather than merely exists. It is realized in and through communication.

Although the term "public sphere" has been associated with deliberative theory in general, and Habermas' works in particular, I argue that we stand to gain from adapting the concept to whatever model of democracy we have in mind. Doing so means that we end up with a term that refers to different concepts: the liberal-individualist public sphere is different to its communitarian or deliberative counterparts. But these different concepts of public sphere stand on common ground: they all refer to that abstract sphere where information is discussed, debated, and distributed, flowing between individuals and institutional actors. With a focus on media, this sphere could perhaps be understood as the sphere of the afterlife of journalistic products. The reasons why these products matter are to be found in what happens *after* they have been produced, published, and made available.

Using such a broad concept has its analytical worth in drawing attention to the situated, contextual nature of mediated communication. Studying the public sphere, for the purposes of this paper, means studying communication in context.

Table 1 [Chapter 7, reproduced here in part] sums up how different concepts of democracy view the public sphere, in abstraction. This is a good starting point to evaluate the performance of Reddit - as an actor in, and a sample of, the public sphere.

	Liberal-individualist democracy	Communitarian-republican democracy	Deliberative democracy
View of the political public sphere:	a free marketplace of ideas	ambivalent: a sphere of forging and maintaining community ties - as well as a free marketplace of ideas, and inconvenient truths	a sphere of filtering and organizing communication flows to ensure the plurality of considered opinion

*Table 2. Conceptual approaches to the public sphere*

If we consider the public sphere a network, then a social news site can be understood as one important node in this network, connecting to various other actors: media outlets, political organizations, and audiences both as publics and as individuals. Analysing these connections makes it possible to understand the extent to which that particular social news site reflects the ideal conditions of the public sphere. What makes such analysis possible is the fact that social news sites are also recorded samples of activity in the public sphere: they are, in a sense, nothing but visualizations of data that describes how information concerning public matters flows between actors of the public sphere. Relying on this data, we can ask questions such as "how does this particular website contribute to the public sphere understood as a free marketplace of ideas?" (Of course, the picture I can ever get looking at various individual nodes in the network will always be a fragment of a whole; and we have at best informed guesses as to how representative of a sample social news sites could offer. I doubt that we're in the position to make any kind of generalization regarding the public sphere as such, based on the performance of social news sites.)

In order to be able to answer such questions, I need to translate the abstract concepts of public sphere to the level of social news sites as concrete, situated spheres of interaction. I do this using an analytical framework developed by Peter Dahlgren. This framework conceptualizes the public sphere as consisting of "three constitutive dimensions: structures, representation, and interaction" (2005, p.148).

This framework is an updated version of a proposed set of four analytical dimensions - those of "media institutions, media representation, social structure, and sociocultural interaction" (Dahlgren 1995, pp.11–23). Arguably, other dimensions could also be drawn up - these being analytical tools, they are informed by arbitrary choices of researchers. The main point is that such dimensions are always likely to overlap and complement each other. Their object of reference is common, so they are complementary parts in a whole. "No one dimension stands on its own; all four interlock with each other and constitute reciprocal conditions for one another" (Dahlgren 1995, p.11).

The **structural** dimension of the public sphere describes its formal and informal institutional features, with regard to how these features enable, aid, or prohibit publishing and accessing information. In particular, it is interested in the cultural, legal, financial and technological frameworks of public communication. For instance: how do certain forms of company ownership, in certain legal environments, under certain technological circumstances, in a given cultural setting contribute to the substantial realization of freedom of speech? It also considers the practical organization of available information (underlining the difference between mere availability and actual accessibility), pondering the problem of centralization vs. fragmentation. And, in an allusion to grand theories of the information society, it is as interested in the problem of too little information, as it is in that of *too much* information (whereby human attention becomes the scarce resource). Finally- accessibility could also be translated into a problem of exclusion - but once again, it is to be kept in mind that certain theories in certain situations do advocate some degree of necessary exclusion.

The dimension of **representation** refers to the *output* of the public sphere - regardless of this output having been produced by the media or other actors. Organizations, legal frameworks, power relations matter in the public sphere; but the form and content of public utterances is, naturally, crucially worthy of attention. The idea that justifies the relevance of this analytical dimension is that whatever information is available in the public sphere should possess certain characteristics. For instance: information should be diverse; it should be reliable; and it should be comprehensible. I understand *structures* in the public sphere as *potentials*. The structural dimensions of the public sphere looks at what kind of information is possible to become available. But the performance of media (and that of other agents in the public sphere) is to be measured chiefly by the *actual* products, utterances, that the structural potentials lead to: what *is* available. Content matters.

The idea underlying the **interactional** dimension of the public sphere is that *audiences* matter, too. Dahlgren understands interaction in two different, but related ways (2005, p.149).

First, interactivity refers to the relationship between more powerful actors within the public sphere (typically: the media), and their less powerful counterparts (typically: citizens as individual users of media products).

Trivially, some organizations and actors are better equipped than others for publishing information. But the concept of the public sphere suggests that the relationship between publishers of information, and their audiences, cannot be characterized as unidirectional. Accordingly, this understanding of interactivity examines how communication flows between the media and "people

formerly known as the audience" - in both directions.

Second, interactivity also refers to the flow of communication *between citizens themselves* - to its "sites and places, discursive practices [and] psychocultural aspects" (ibid).

There are other possible ways to understand interactivity. One of these refers to the flow of communication between powerful peers ("media-to-media" interactivity, as seen e.g. in inter-media agenda-setting). Another examines the concrete, practical ways in which audiences can interact with media products, as seen from the perspective of usability ("navigational interactivity;" Deuze 2003). Both of these latter aspects of interactivity are largely covered by Dahlgren's analytical domains of *structure* and *representation* (and, as mentioned above, these analytical dimensions can only make sense when understood as complementary parts of a whole).

In sum, the interactional dimension of the public sphere describes its *discursive* aspect: how communication, related to tangible products of published information, flows between its various actors.

The analytical dimensions of representation and interactivity direct attention to the two kinds of content that Reddit produces.

On the one hand, it creates compilations of content - news articles, videos - texts in the broad sense. This is what I understand as their **primary content**, and this content is what the analysis of representation focuses on.

On the other hand, Reddit also hosts *discussions about* its primary content. I refer to these discussions collectively as **secondary content**, although redditors themselves might in certain cases consider the discussions more important than the articles that sparked them. The analytical dimension of interactivity focuses on these discussions, treating them as analysable documents of interaction between users, and trying to infer from them the characteristics of this interaction.

I treat the primary and secondary contents as **two separate genres**, considering that their respective forms, subject matters, and modes of address tend to follow different conventions. I believe this analytical distinction helps me achieve a better understanding of how Reddit, as a social news site, help or hinder the democratization of information.

I use the framework above to bridge the gap between abstract ideals and empirically observable characteristics, by mapping how those ideals relate to the the structural, representative, and discursive aspects of Reddit as an agent in the public sphere. Thus Table 2 can be expanded in the following manner:

	Liberal-individualist democracy		Communitarian-republican democracy		Deliberative democracy	
View of the political public sphere:	a free marketplace of ideas		ambivalent: a sphere of forging and maintaining community ties - as well as a free marketplace of ideas, and inconvenient truths		a sphere of filtering and organizing communication flows to ensure the plurality of considered opinion	
	Structural requirements:	...	Structural requirements:	...	Structural requirements:	...
	Representational requirements:	...	Representational requirements:	...	Representational requirements:	...
	Interactional requirements:	...	Interactional requirements:	...	Interactional requirements:	...

*Table 3. An analytical framework, illustrated*

In order to be able to fill in the blanks above, I first describe Reddit as part of the public sphere, and as the practical context in which said criteria should apply. I then move on to a formal conceptualization of structural, representative and interactional requirements that it ought to meet in the three democracy variants discussed. Subsequently, I turn to operationalizing these criteria.

## Chapter 9. Conceptualization of normative criteria

### 9.1. The context of Reddit

A detailed description of Reddit is the subject of Chapter 11. The few paragraphs below merely provide a brief introduction to the site, thereby delineating the practical context in which normative criteria are to be applied.

Reddit is a social news website: a website that aggregates, filters and re-publishes previously published online content, based on the collective opinion of the site's active members. It utilizes a distributed, democratic editorial process to publish a compilation of content available online.

Registered members submit to the site pieces of text, and/or hyperlinks that point to content hosted elsewhere on the web. Each redditor is able to see every other redditor's submissions, and vote on them. An "upvote," or "upboat" in Reddit lingo, is an expression of approval, while a "downvote" is an expression of disapproval. (Giving someone an upvote is equivalent to "liking" on Facebook.) Votes are aggregated, and submitted content is displayed in function of its popularity, as measured by the difference between up- and downvote scores. Popular articles become more visible, as they are displayed more prominently than less popular ones. Visually, the primary content (see Chapter 8) of Reddit consists of a list of hyperlinks, where popular content is displayed on the top of the list, and unpopular content gravitates toward the bottom.

Reddit is internally divided into several topic-specific sections, called **subreddits**, although "the" front page of the site provides a common interface for all of these sections. Redditors are free to pick and mix their contents by subscribing to any number of subreddits that they are interested in.

Social news sites are social insofar as they offer various features for their members to communicate, and thereby to initiate and maintain social relationships. Similarly to general purpose social network sites (e.g. Facebook), users can enter into "friendships" with each other, use on-site systems to exchange messages privately, and conduct public discussions, just like on an online forum. Reddit picks and mixes features from news sites, blogs, social network sites, and discussion forums. It has a designated primary function - aggregating and filtering news -, but tight-knit, vibrant communities are also known to develop around the primary function (Rieseberg 2011).

Although the general operational principle of Reddit is that it is democratic, in the sense that each

user has a theoretically equal say in influencing what content becomes popular and thus visible, such sites often employ moderators. Moderators, or "mods" for short, are users with special rights, whose task is to make sure the contributions of users satisfy the formal and written, as well as informal and unwritten rules that govern such sites. For instance, moderators are supposed to remove content that would infringe copyright, or would otherwise be illegal. Apart from moderators, owners and managers of Reddit also have privileged access to their sites.

The term "news" is to be understood loosely here. Contents of Reddit tend to be diverse, ranging from classic hard news to re-posts of several years old cat pictures and video clips. With several tens of thousands of subreddits, one is hard pressed to come up with something that Reddit doesn't cover.

Finally, it's worth noting that using Reddit is free of charge. The site is predominantly financed by advertising, and to a lesser extent by the sale of premium services.

## **9.2. The structural dimension**

The structural dimension of the public sphere describes its formal and informal institutional features, with regard to how these features enable, aid, prohibit or hinder publishing, accessing, and interacting with information. Accordingly, from this perspective, Reddit is analysed as an organization that uses various financial, technological and human resources in order to produce some kind of content.

What structural features should such an organization exhibit? On the first approach, the trivial answer is: features which enable and support information democratization.

In order to arrive at a more precise and meaningful answer, I considered Reddit as an agent acting in the public sphere, and, taking cues from van Dijck's analysis of online platforms as socioeconomic structures (2013, pp.36–44), as well as from previous studies of online platforms (see Chapter 2), I identified five sets of structural features that seemed to have an import on their democratic performance. These sets of features, or structural dimensions, are as follows: the sites' business model and ownership (9.2.1); their accessibility (9.2.2); their features of functional interactivity<sup>33</sup> (9.2.3); their potential contribution to the fragmentation of audiences (9.2.4); and their potential source diversity (9.2.5). In discussing these structural aspects, I consider how each of them relate to

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<sup>33</sup> This refers to the structural features of social news sites that enable particular ways of interaction. The interactional analytical dimension, in turn, examines ways in which users *actually* interact with the site and one another.



the three ideal concepts of democracy.

### 9.2.1. Ownership and business model

Reddit is a media organ run by a business organization, whose primary interest lies in generating revenue and thus providing for its own subsistence and development. Debates concerning ideal media conduct (Christians et al. 2009) suggest that this objective can be at odds with requirements informed by normative ideals.

The same debates also suggest that this state of things doesn't necessarily have to be a problem: one could just as well argue that profit-oriented media should not be judged by the same standards as public service media. Yet there are several studies that try to assess *commercial* media from a *public service* perspective, Freelon's (2010) and Meraz's (2009) included.

Views on the libertarian extreme might say that this in itself is nonsensical. Commercial media products are just that: products. Markets shall be regulated to some extent: rights and responsibilities of sellers and buyers need to be stipulated. But going beyond such a regulatory framework, and expecting commercial products to somehow be conducive to democracy is utopian. Just as we don't expect other kinds of products - from shoes to candy bars, from cars to laundry detergents - to improve social liberty and equality, we should not bother establishing similar analytical-evaluative criteria for the media, either.

However- there's a long tradition of doing just that (McQuail 1993), based on the recognition that media products are *not* like any other product, because they do influence important aspects of our understanding of ourselves and the world we live in, and thus, they have an important effect on our social organization. The media, commercial or not, matter<sup>34</sup>.

Even so, this belief often goes hand in hand with an understanding that a firm dividing line should be drawn between public service and commercial media. This is especially apparent in the field of broadcast electronic media (McQuail 2010, pp.177–182). Commercial media should only be subject to market limitations - while public service media should take on increased responsibilities, as stipulated by the state.

The interesting twist that Reddit adds to the picture is that despite being a profit-oriented business organization itself, it is not limited to publishing commercial content.

The content of social news sites offers a sample of *everything* published and available online. This

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34 The "Whig account of journalism" (Conboy 2004, p.4) takes this idea to the extreme: it shows an exaggerated belief in the emancipatory role of journalism in Western societies. Conboy labels this account "one of the most widespread fallacies" (ibid).

sample may well include sources officially labelled commercial as well as ones labelled public service<sup>35</sup>; and in fact, they offer a level playing field between these (as well as between commercial media organs of various clout).

What's more, this openness is at the heart of the business proposition of such sites, as in: "We ask for some of your attention (by showing you advertising), and in return, we offer you *better* content than what you'd get anywhere else." *Better* could just as well mean *more democratic*.

To put it shortly: regardless of how one defines public service, social news sites have a chance to deliver it, despite themselves being commercially run. In addition, there is one sense in which social news sites, given their editorial principles, are *by definition public service*: the sense that they provide a snapshot of the demand of a given slice of the public, as expressed through a set of interactive tools.

I attempt to bypass the problem of commercial vs public service media by focusing instead on the division between *constitutive* and *non-constitutive* outlets (Chapter 3.1.2). I also propose that "outlet," in the specific case of social news websites, should refer to their particular sections - in the case of Reddit, this means individual subreddits. Some sections of these sites - for instance, sections dedicated to political discussion - stand to be accountable for their democratic performance, while others - for instance, sections dedicated to *Starcraft* or lucid dreaming or volleyball - do not.

Liberal, communitarian and deliberative models of democracy share a **formal consensus** about requirements concerning the ownership and business model of social news sites: in the case of each model, it is expected that **economic and business-related factors contribute to**, or at least do not interfere with, **the democratic performance of such sites' constitutive sections** - however "democratic performance" is defined in the representational and interactional analytical dimensions.

### 9.2.2. Accessibility and its necessary limitations

Reddit depends on the contribution of their users. Accessibility refers to the idea of users being practically able to interact with the site - to submit articles, to read them, to vote on them, and to participate in discussions about them. Accessibility goes beyond mere availability: it refers to the concept of would-be-redditors having the opportunity, as well as the skills and resources, to become such sites' productive users (see Hargittai 2002).

Given the principled call for the substantial realization of the freedom of speech - a feature of all three models of democracy examined -, it seems straightforward that accessibility is a good thing.

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35 Such as National Public Radio in the US (NPR, <http://www.npr.org>).

The more people can access Reddit, the more of them will be able to impart information on others (intrinsic value), and more ideas will be brought to the table (instrumental value) - good ones as well as bad ones, which will benefit everyone.

But there is more to the problem of accessibility than meets the eye. I examine two of its aspects, which refer, respectively, to the general *skill- and resource related requirements* of access; and to the *necessity of limiting access* out of normative concerns in particular cases.

Trivially, the use of Reddit requires certain skills (predominantly: literacy, language and IT skills), as well as resources (physical access to a computer or mobile device with online connection). This study is not in the position to measure how well equipped potential audiences are in this regard. But the structural analysis of Reddit could indicate if some groups of potential users are systematically precluded from actually using the site.

For instance, Reddit may erect a paywall - to grant full access to their services only to paying members -, establish a demanding interface - or simply exclude potential users through their choice of operating language.

Not surprisingly, it can be argued that all models of democracy considered in this paper share a conviction that skill- and resource-related barriers to entry should be as low as possible, in order to prevent the systematic exclusion of potential users.

However, the problem of accessibility includes the problem of too large, as well as that of too small, user communities. The democratizing potential of the internet is often tied to its decentralized and radical openness, and its having overcome physical and socio-cultural barriers between would-be conversational partners. But models of democracy tend to take a territorial state apparatus for granted; i.e. a system of social organization where publics correspond to a set of real-life institutions, with well-delineated scopes of authority (Fraser 2007). Such is not the case online.

Writing about deliberative democracy, Garnham (1993) refers to this problem as that of "goodness of fit," where institutions with political power do not fit publics that are informally formed and organized. The public sphere might bring about strands of considered public opinion - but no institution will be capable of acting accordingly, and thus, even in spite of political willingness and public support, nothing will happen. This problem is especially apparent in the domain of international politics. Supranational bodies have limited power, and international publics have even more limited power of addressing supranational bodies directly, without the intervention of nation states. Thus, without corresponding institutions, there is little point in wasting resources on trying to

encourage international deliberation<sup>36</sup>.

Of course the ideal solution would be not to abandon such tries, but rather to create the required institutions. Yet there's always the perennial question of scarce resources. If we can expect citizens to sacrifice some of their precious free time to deliberation, should it really be devoted to deliberation which can only lead to public opinion that is impotent, because it cannot be addressed to any given institution?

Perhaps not, but the main point here is that the problem of the goodness of fit *should not be solved by tailoring publics to existing institutions*. If there happens to be a mismatch, the answer should not be exclusion, but instead the expansion of institutions, or the creation of new ones, that could accommodate increasingly de-territorialized public opinion.

Which, so far as my research project is concerned, can be taken to mean that goodness of fit might present a problem - but this is not the problem of social news sites. As suggested elsewhere, the impeccable democratic performance of media systems is but one, necessary but in itself insufficient condition of democracy - and social news sites are only one among several media. Their democratic contribution might be stifled by an inappropriate or incapable political system - but this paper is not in position to tackle that problem.

Still, even if we sidestep the challenge of fitting institutions, there are other arguments that suggest that under certain circumstances, it might be democratically desirable to curb access to *constitutive* sections of Reddit. Such concerns do not apply in the case of **liberal-individualist** democracy, and its free marketplace of ideas. But they do in the case of communitarian and deliberative models.

**Communitarianism**, specifically, brings an argument to the table against supranationalism, as expressed in a disregard for national boundaries in political opinion formation.

The communitarian-republican model is informed by a principle of federalism, incorporating diversity as well as unity. The "strong social fabric" of political communities results from interdependence and an awareness of shared identity (Selznick 2002, pp.16–17). And since modern societies tend to follow *national* frameworks in their legal, administrative, economic, financial and even cultural organization, it is easy to see why citizens tend to understand their communal allegiance in the same terms too. In a sense, humanity *is* a community, with certain universal rights which always should be respected; but this universality offers only very limited common ground -

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36 Note: Habermas' discourse principle argues that everyone affected by a decision should be able to agree to it; but without a lively international public sphere *and* its corresponding supranational institutions, the legitimacy of foreign policy decisions will always be highly debatable.

one on which meaningful social cooperation cannot be expected.

In other words, just because we, as members of nation A, respect citizens of nation B as human beings, it does not follow that they should be considered part of our political community<sup>37</sup>. Thus, there are good reasons to curb their political participation - and perhaps their engagement with "our" media too. This, however, need not amount to full exclusion by denying access.

In **deliberative democracy**, public opinion should steer the political process. This implies that public opinion is representative of a group of people that in some real, tangible sense, share some physical space, language, culture, and legal status. Were it otherwise, there would be no good reason why decision makers in the political core should - or could - consider public opinion as a point of orientation in their work.

This representativeness of public opinion might be upset, if its development relies heavily on outsiders to the polity.

This is not *necessarily* a problem. As noted earlier, deliberative democracy is about solving social problems through the application of social intelligence - and intelligent, good ideas can come from any source. Arguably, outsiders' distance to problems might even allow for deeper reflection, and thus better insights about the solution: it might be easier to get the full picture if one takes a step back. And outsiders could also act as catalysts to the deliberative process, if they are aware of their limited knowledge, and they try to balance it by asking questions. ("I don't know much about this issue, could you explain it to me like I'm 5 years old?")

But at the same time, outsiders will always be in a precarious position, lacking the important first-hand experience of those who themselves are involved.

Thus, in deliberative democracy, as in communitarianism, a balance should be found between universal access and, whenever necessary, prioritizing the access of those who are themselves part of the polity.

In sum: Reddit should be accessible, and having low requirements of use. But its accessibility should also be subject to context-dependent review, in order to find out where less can be more.

### **9.2.3. Meaningful functional interactivity**

Reddit is a model of democracy itself: through specific structural features, it invites the participation of everyone, at the same time imposing rules that make this participation, as well as

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<sup>37</sup> For a recent example, consider the words of Greek president Karolos Papoulias, reflecting on what they see as other EU countries' attempts to meddle with the Greek economy - "Who is [German finance minister] Mr Schäuble to revile Greece? Who are the Dutch? Who are the Finns?" (Anon 2012b)

the cooperation of users, possible. Redditors are free to act in certain ways - within limits set by structural (what one is practically capable of) as well as legal (what one is allowed to do) and cultural (what one is supposed to do without breaking unwritten rules and customs) limits. The term "functional interactivity" (Deuze 2003, p.14) captures these possibilities and limitations. It refers to the range of actions that users can take.

The performance of social news sites depends on how their users behave. But how users *can* behave depends on structural features. It is therefore important to analyse the architecture of such sites, and to do so on two levels.

On a broader, macro-level approach, the site's general understanding of the role of users should be discerned. Nip (2006) offers one typology of journalism, which proposes to be a good point of orientation: her distinction between types is based partly on the level of audience participation<sup>38</sup>. On a micro level, the question is: how much power is given to the audience? In other words: what precise mechanisms make the site run as it is run? What is the "software code" (Goode 2009) of such sites, i.e., what algorithms and architectural features does it use in order to produce its contents? And finally, what are the written and unwritten rules that inform users' behaviour?

Thus, the analysis of Reddit's interactional features involves exploring its regime of censorship: prohibiting certain instances of user contribution receiving attention from other users - in essence, blocking access to particular submitted articles or comments.

In line with the broad legal framework underlying Reddit's operation, censorship is likely to affect contributions that are seen as illegal (e.g. the sharing of child pornography), or ones that are deemed disruptive by the moderators of the sites themselves (e.g. a hateful, non-constructive comment in a discussion thread). But there is a chance that operators of Reddit might censor contributions that are perfectly legal - but seen as contrary to the site's interests.

Importantly, I treat censorship as distinct from the phenomena of certain contributions of users becoming in practice invisible, as a result of other users' activities. After all, filtering is the single most important goal of social news sites; and this includes making unworthy contributions less visible. Downvoting a submitted article is not the same as prohibiting users from voting on it.

The principle of substantial realization of free expression is a cornerstone for **all three models** of democracy analysed in this research project. In line with this principle, Reddit is expected to be

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<sup>38</sup> Her five types of journalism are *traditional*, *public*, *interactive*, *participatory* and *citizen* journalism. They are tied to increasing involvement of, and reliance on, non-professional journalists.

open and flexible, so as to allow maximum freedom to their users.

At the same time, the structure of the site should also enable the exercise of some sort of meta-editorial control, including censorship. Such control would allow Reddit to remain faithful to the objectives and framing values of its creators and owners. For example, such control is necessary to prevent the site from becoming a literal partner in crime - a tool of illegal activities; and such control also allows to resolve conflicts between users.

I encapsulate these aspirations in the term "**meaningful functional interactivity**" - and explore how it is realized using a qualitative approach.

#### 9.2.4. Audience fragmentation

The technological development of communication devices has brought about increased connectivity among citizens. It has also brought about ever improving ways to filter all the available information. Not only can one access a larger number of information sources than before, it is also possible to customize these sources to an ever greater extent, according to our interests and tastes (Downey 2007, pp.120–121). Information technology is "a lubricant that enables the satisfaction of [informational] preferences against the friction of geography" (van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson 2005, p.861) - as well as the friction that is experienced when exposed to information contrary to one's established preferences (Mutz 2006). As fortunate citizens of the developed world, we have excellent tools to be exposed only to views that are congruent with our own, and to hear just those news that we are interested in.

The upshot of all this is an ever greater fragmentation of media audiences. And as people filter out information that they are not interested in, and views that they don't agree with, society itself will pay the price, by losing a key integrative force of the mass media. Several scholars have formulated similar arguments, with slightly different emphases; see e.g. Sunstein (2007), Starr (2012), and Prior (2007). Iyengar and Hahn (2009) note that fragmentation is aided by certain business practices: on a highly saturated media market, specializing in a topic or in the representation of an ideological affiliation can be profitable (as demonstrated by *Fox News*). And, to make matters worse, audience fragmentation might go hand in hand with market consolidation (Dahlgren 2009, p.36–37), resulting in a few powerful media conglomerates dominating the market through a wide selection of topically and ideologically specialized organs<sup>39</sup>.

Others claim that concerns about excessive audience fragmentation tend to be blown out of proportion (e.g. Trilling & Schoenbach 2012, Garrett 2009, Thurman & Schifferes 2012, Tewksbury

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39 See also Schudson (2005, p.176), who underlines that "fewer and fewer corporations control more and more of the American news media [and] major media conglomerates control more and more of the world's media," while also emphasising that economic organization of news is only one of the factors in its quality and general characteristics.

& Rittenberg 2012): even in the presence of sophisticated personalization tools, audience fragmentation is certainly not the dominant trend that characterizes our online news consumption. Still, it seems highly important to explore the structural organization of social news sites, in order to find out how they help or hinder the fragmentation of their audiences, based on the users' interests and their ideological preferences. What kind of tools do sites provide for them to customise their news content? What kind of freedom do these users enjoy in creating new communities under such a site itself?

(a) **Liberal-individualist** democracy, as I conceptualize it, has no requirements in this regard. It shows no concern for fragmentation or the lack thereof. It argues that users should be free to filter out whatever they would like to - arguably, this might just be the rational thing to do (Downs 1957, p.213). It leaves it up to citizens to decide what information they want to be exposed to, and how they would like to associate among themselves. Should they want to create small groups of like-minded individuals and exercise excessive filtering of the news material they receive - we have to trust that they know what they are doing, just as we have to trust individuals in charge of media organizations that they will deal with the situation the best way they can. So long as the freedom and undistorted nature of markets is guaranteed by an efficient legal framework, the fragmentation of audiences itself is not an issue.

However, the liberal-individualist view agrees with its alternatives that a substantial lack of diversity in the *available* information *is* problematic. To put it in another way: *one should be free to pick and mix their news – so long as one is able to choose from many different points of view.*

(b) The **communitarian-republican** model, in turn, has a different point of view. Or *two* different points of view, to be more precise.

On the one hand, it suggests that individuals, as members of various communities, should be able to filter their political information according to their own taste, in line with their respective communities' values. The rationale for this is the idea that taking part in supportive, "safe" communication with like-minded others promotes group cohesion, harmony, and the development of strong identities (Chapter 5.3).

On the other hand, it is citizens' responsibility, within their allegiance to the national community, to get informed about all sides to all publicly relevant issues, to acknowledge inconvenient truths, and to consider society as a whole of an inclusive community, in which internal differences must be reconciled or at least worked around. Citizens cannot always choose to hide their heads in the sand, so to say, in their private, friends-only sandboxes.



Thus, social news sites face the dual structural requirement of *both* enabling (encouraging) and limiting (discouraging) filtering, and thus audience fragmentation.

(c) As for **deliberative democracy**, the situation is less ambiguous. This model considers excessive fragmentation a risk that should be dealt with.

One task of the public sphere, in my deliberative model, is to act as a sensor, and gather as much information from all domains of society as possible. But it should then also prioritize between the issues and points of view thus revealed, and focus attention on the ones that *matter more* than others. In order for considered opinion to crystallize about these issues, there needs to be a lot of discussion about them, involving a large number and variety of contributors. The media should therefore attempt to curb the fragmentation of audiences, in order to increase the coherence of public debate. Curbing fragmentation along personal interests makes sure that users talk about the same thing; and curbing ideological fragmentation should guarantee that audiences remain heterogeneous, contributing to the debate with a large number of diverse points of view.

#### **9.2.5. Potential source diversity**

Substantial realization of free speech includes making sure that a wide pool of opinions and information is available for everyone. It also includes making sure that all the available information tends to be reliable - enabling citizens to base their decisions on it. Social news sites, ideally, contribute to realizing both of these ends, by crowdsourcing the task of collecting, as well as that of filtering, all kinds of news and information. Singular human beings are not as efficient in collecting information as machines and computer programs can be, but what we lack in quantity, we make up for in quality. Every act of sharing, "liking" or voting on the web is based on a human intelligence-based decision about the quality of the piece of content in question. Make a large number of people participate in the collection and filtering of news, and what you have is the best editorial mechanism there is: comprehensive, and based on human categories of quality.

That, at least, is the ideal - but how this works out in practice is an empirical question. Part of the answer lies in analysing the diversity of sources that users of social news sites rely on. Low diversity here would mean a small, narrow pool of opinion and information, which in all likelihood would contribute to citizens being more polarized in their opinions, and less well-informed.

Yet the economy of the media industries suggests that lower levels of diversity are likelier, as a handful of powerful organs exert their dominating influence in setting the agenda.

"The media industries are following the general patterns found in the economy. Massive media empires have emerged on a global scale, concentrating ownership in the hands of a decreasing number of megacorporations [which] dominate the media landscape of the modern world." (Dahlgren 2009, p.36.)

This is worrying - from the perspective of all three models of democracy referred to here - because the concentration of media industries is feared to lead to diminishing diversity of contents (Barber 1997, (McChesney & Nichols 2010, pp.7–56).

Such a state of things is hardly surprising. Producing high-quality contents for the mass consumption has always been a resource-intensive process (Lippmann 2004 [1921], pp.176–177), and the resources it depends on "may well be best concentrated in formal, bureaucratic organizations" (Kreiss et al. 2010, p.254) - as opposed to smaller, informal, or grassroots organizations, or one-man "organizations" of citizen journalists. It has been shown that established, powerful media are also skilful in defeating the challenge to their authority, posed by citizen journalism, by taking advantage of citizen journalism *on their own terms* (Sjøvaag 2010). Consider the example of iReport, CNN's web service enabling productive participation of the audience: according to Kperogi (2010), CNN exploits citizen journalists, offering nothing in exchange for their voluntary work, while strengthening its own image, credibility, status, and authority. Thus, even though technological development might have made the tools of production themselves widely available, this alone does not seem to undermine the dominance of a handful of professional organizations - which can realize economies of scale, and which possess other, partly non-material, resources involved in media production.

But technology is also involved in the distribution of media content, and in this regard, audiences seem to have the upper hand (Dylko et al. 2011). At least this is the case in online environments, where sharing is easy, cheap, and encouraged by popular web services. Social news sites are built around the idea of (re-)distribution controlled by non-professional activists - thus it would be interesting to know whether their power over distribution can meaningfully counterbalance the inequalities in power over media production. Can they really "level the playing field" for competing media organs?

The structural dimension of this problem refers to the features of social news sites that enable, help and hinder the realization of a meaningful diversity of sources used. As a general criteria, **uniform across all three models** of democracy considered, Reddit should be organized in such a way that they attain a meaningfully diverse pool of sources.

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### 9.3. The representational dimension

From this analytical perspective, Reddit is a media outlet, comparable to newspapers, television channels, or conventional news sites. Whatever its peculiar structural features are, its primary function is to provide its readers with a selection of articles; a compilation of content.

What this content is like is a matter of great importance to democratic theory. Since we rely so much on the mediated information in our everyday life, and in our political and social organization, this information needs to be of a certain quality. The following sub-chapters explore what "a certain quality" should mean from the perspective of the three models of democracy I rely on. The criteria below, gleaned from sources reviewed in Part II, are formulated around dimensions concerning content diversity (9.3.1), source diversity (9.3.2), objectivity (9.3.3), the site's temporal orientation (9.3.4), civility (9.3.5), the presence of reasoned arguments (9.3.6), and reflexivity (9.3.7).

#### 9.3.1. Meaningful content diversity

**All three models of democracy** studied here expect social news sites to contribute to the **substantial realization of free speech**. Perhaps every citizen is theoretically able to impart information to others, to benefit from the information made available by others, and to participate in public debates - but the question is, after all, whether or not these theoretical possibilities are realized. The analysis of the diversity of contents of social news sites should provide an answer.

An infinitely good measure of free expression would be able to consider all individuals, as well as groups, in a society, and ascertain the extent to which their rights to information, representation and participation are realized. Such a measure would track how individuals and groups change over time, and how the realization of their above mentioned rights can mean different things in different contexts. Unsurprisingly, it is impossible to come up with such a measure.

But we can approximate it through the measure of diversity of publicly available information. This approximation involves an assumption: that individual as well as group interests within a society will differ from one another (cf. Mansbridge's (1980) unitary democracy). If this is so, then it is reasonable to expect the diversity of citizens to be reflected in publicly available information - that is both produced and relied on by the citizens themselves.

Media contents, in other words, should be diverse. They should describe different problems of society, from various points of view. They should deal with the interests of various groups. They should draw attention to a large number of aspects to the experience of social cooperation - of living together in a society. They should represent the voices of minorities as well as majorities, of socio-

economic elites as well as non-elites, of children and the elderly as well as the 18-49 group of commercially relevant consumers, of the powers-that-be as well as their challengers.

Diversity, however, does not imply that an equal share of attention is given to each topic, group, or individual (Wessler 2008, p.3).

(a) **Why diversity matters.** Diversity serves the interests of *those whose voice is being aired in the media*, as well as those who happen to be listening. In this respect, content diversity overlaps with the measure of objectivity: it is generally agreed upon that news should be objective; but “one can often avoid criticism [of being biased] by abstaining from reporting on a particular item” (Westerståhl 1983, p.405). Significant content diversity makes bias-by-omission less likely to occur. Having said that, it would be utopian to expect media contents to also be *complete*. We can conceive of publicly available information as a description or a map of what is going on in society at any given moment - but for a map to be fully accurate and complete, it needs to be as large and detailed as its object of reference (see Borges' "Of Exactitude in Science," 1973, p.141). What we get to see through the media are at best a tiny fragment of particular interpretations of "what is going on" - and this fragment is further diminished by our limitations: we can only sacrifice so much time and attention to the media. Which, in turn, strengthens the call for diversity: democracy, as manifested in the principle of free expression, requires that in the limited time we can dedicate to the media, we get introduced to a diversity of information.

Diversity can be understood in different ways. With reference to the media in particular, McQuail (1993, pp.145–147) distinguishes *internal* and *external* diversity. Internal diversity describes the condition of a media organ that provides heterogeneous contents, while external diversity refers to the condition where individual media organs provide largely homogeneous content (each serving a different group), but they differ from one another. (See also Chapter 3.1.2.)

In this classification, Reddit should be *internally* diverse.

Possibly, the case of democracy could also be promoted by a set of internally homogeneous social news sites, which would differ from one another, and whose totality would thus serve the diversity principle to be realized on a higher level. But *the unique potential of such sites is precisely that they are in a good position to achieve high levels of diversity internally*. From the point of view of readers: Reddit makes exposure to diverse contents easy and convenient - one does not have to go out of one's way to receive all sorts of information, because the site itself collects and filters whatever is available. And from the point of view of those looking for an audience: the internal

diversity of Reddit would prove that it offers a wide range of sources the possibility to set the agenda, and to compete for the attention of readers in a relatively level playing field. Reddit, and other social news sites, could act as one-stop-shops for democratic political information.

But it is necessary to address a counterargument to the importance of diversity.

Normative media theories have been debating diversity for half a century, if not longer. These debates originated in an environment where only a limited selection of mediated content was available to audiences. In a low-choice media environment, the diversity of available information assumed paramount importance (Prior 2007, Aalberg et al. 2013).

Conditions are quite different in the hyperlinked, super-connected world of the internet. On this network of networks, the theoretical availability of information might not seem like a problem at all. But if this is so, why bother looking into what kinds of content any particular website offers? Perhaps we should focus scholarly attention not on what is available (everything is), but on what web users actually access and engage with. What matters is not diversity "sent" (available), but diversity "received:" experienced and taken advantage of (van der Wurff 2011).

I have two answers to this counterargument.

The first answer concerns the special nature of social news sites. Namely: because the contents of social news sites are produced by their audiences, studying their contents *is* studying their audiences. Everything that appears on the front page of social news sites appears there as the direct result of individual users' engagement: submitting, voting on, commenting on articles.

We know (Edberg 2013) that the majority of visitors of Reddit are lurkers - users who do not actively get involved in the production of such sites' contents, but free ride on the efforts of others. Analysing the contents of the site, we don't get to learn anything about lurkers. Even so, Reddit provides one answer to the question of what, out of the infinite amounts of information available online, certain audiences actually pay attention to.

My second answer concerns the theoretical nature of information that is available online.

It is not a new or surprising idea that the sheer amount of content can become a burden on audiences: there is no way anyone could grasp anything more than the tiniest fraction of everything that is available. Audiences are in natural need of points of orientation - such as news sites that set agendas, offering starting points to direct one's attention; or search engines, that help audiences find relevant content without having to dig through the vast pool of "everything else."

The problem with search engines is that they do not seem to be very well equipped for orienting

audiences about *news*. Their service consists in delivering information about some specific subject that the user is interested in; but how do users know they are interested in some specific news if they are unaware of that piece of news? How to search for information on the latest Hungarian corruption scandal if I'm not aware that such a scandal erupted in the first place? Taking a glance at one's favourite news site is a quick, intuitive, and well-tried method of getting a sense of what one should be paying attention to at any given moment. Searching for "what happened today?" on Google is cumbersome, and certainly less intuitive.

Admittedly, there is a demonstrable, non-negligible flow of traffic from search engines to news sites (Newman 2012, pp.15–17). But we don't know much about the qualities of this flow: we don't know what users are looking for when they end up on news sites after their search efforts. It stands to reason to expect that the majority of these users are using search engines not to explore what they are unaware of, but to explore further some issue that they already heard about.

At any rate, even if search engines are becoming more important as agenda-setters, there is no reason to expect news sites becoming less important in their respective function. Van der Wurff's recent study (2011) , as well as Curran et al. (2009), confirm that, regarding news, diversity *sent* (content that is *practically* available through news outlets) enables and influences diversity *received* (what audiences actually engage with and end up knowing about). Exploring the concept of diversity might have been necessitated by wildly different historical circumstances - but, for different reasons, the concept still seems very much relevant today.

**(b) Two dimensions of content diversity.** Specifically, when it comes to elections, two dimensions of content diversity emerge as relevant. The first of these concerns the representation of **persons** involved in the election: political representatives competing for votes. *Constitutive* media should dedicate attention to each of them; to mainstream as well as fringe candidates, so as to make sure that voters have an understanding of their options. Again, diversity with regard to persons does not necessarily require that every candidate is given equal attention (cf. the fairness doctrine, McQuail 1993, pp.50–52), but it can be expected from constitutive media to provide voters with an adequate representation of the overall lineup of competitors and their respective positions (Belt et al. 2012). Based on such a representation voters should be able to decide which candidate is most likely to represent their own positions best.

The second relevant dimension of content diversity concerns the kinds of topic-related frames employed in the coverage of elections. Specifically, the "game frame," or "horse race coverage" is of key interest (Lawrence 2000, Wessler 2008, p.8).

The game frame refers to reporting politics as a sport event, a race of some sort. This is a controversial way of coverage. On the one hand, it's popular among journalists, partly because it provides a way to write about politics "objectively," partly because the frame lends itself easily to the construction of newsworthy narratives, focusing on conflict, drama, and easily identifiable characters: winners and losers in the race. On the other hand, some are concerned that relying on the game frame means ignoring the substance of politics: instead of dealing with the ideas and actual work of politicians, discussion will focus on their campaign strategies and poll results, which might say very little about what the politicians actually stand for (Lawrence 2000, Cappella & Jamieson 1997). A recent study (Pedersen 2012) claims that exposure to the game frame does not only correlate with cynicism of voters, but also with lower levels of political efficacy (belief about one's own competence).

Thus, it is expected that *constitutive* media coverage is *not* dominated by the game frame. It should also provide voters with information on substantial matters.

The deliberative view of democracy suggests that further distinctions are made among such substance-focused articles.

For deliberative democracy, elections are about coming to terms with current problems and anticipating future ones, and choosing the candidate who is best suited to dealing with these. Consequently, *constitutive* election coverage should deal with policies and problems, as well as the politicians themselves. But this latter is once again a controversial position.

Among others, Habermas (2006, pp.422–423) and Castells (2007, pp.242–243) have emphasized the dangers of "personality politics," suggesting that a focus on the personal characteristics of politicians is likely to result in shallow, cynical, sensationalist and scandalous coverage, that even threatens to "rob us of the centerpiece of deliberative politics" (Habermas 2006, p.423). In contrast, others have argued for a reasonable mix between issue- and personality-based coverage (Dahlgren 2009, p.46), arguing that a focus on persons, even in the form of image-based coverage, is a way to provide voters with a reasonable "shortcut in the costly search for political information" (Manin 1994, p.163). I side with this latter view.

In addition, the deliberative emphasis on reflexivity suggests that special attention is dedicated to coverage which *reflects* on the process of election, both in practice (e.g. "is campaigning fair?") and in theory ("is this the best way to elect our representatives - and if not, what would be the alternatives?"). *Constitutive* media should be asking such questions.

### 9.3.2 Meaningful diversity of sources

It is not desirable that a small number of power- and resourceful media organs dominate the news agenda, because this is likely to lead to a narrowing of information and opinion pool available. **All three democratic traditions agree** that a plurality of perspectives should be represented in the public sphere.

In the case of Reddit, this principle is relatively easy to translate into practice: they should offer contents from a large number of different sources. Chapter 9.2.5. deals with the structural requirements making this source diversity possible ("levelling the playing field" between various sources). In the analytical dimension of representation, the focus is on the actual practice. The question here is whether the contents of such sites originate from many different sources.

But what is a source?

Here I use the term in a meaning slightly different to the one most common in the field of journalism. A source, as far as this research project is concerned, is *an entity that published an article*, where an "article" is a logically coherent set of information, represented in textual, visual, and aural forms on the web.

An "entity" could be a single person as well as an organization. The distinction should be based on who, or what, controls the resources that enable the person actually, physically (or digitally) publishing the article. *The New York Times*, for instance, is to be understood as the source of an article published on NYTimes.com; while the source of an article published on a personal blog of a private individual is that individual herself.

"Publishing" here is to be understood broadly, in the sense of "making publicly available," including the practice of distribution by sharing links, or submitting these to a social news website.

This understanding stands in contrast to the journalistic understanding of source as "someone quoted in an article." I am concerned with questions relating to the power to produce and distribute news articles - and thus my sources are persons and organizations which do just that.

The term "meaningful diversity of sources," with an emphasis on the first word, is inspired by the recognition that the online distribution of contents is very easy. Becoming a source as a distributor of articles is simple and undemanding: it can be done by posting a status update on Facebook, clicking the "thumbs up!"-button on YouTube, re-blogging an image on Tumblr, or clicking the "Share this on Reddit!"-button at the bottom of an article in an online newspaper. Producing news material, on the other hand, remains difficult and resource-intensive, and for this reason, I believe it is important to distinguish between second-hand distributors and producers of original material.



According to Goode (2009), much journalism online is *metajournalism*: building on previously available material by reflecting on it, commenting on it, re-packaging or re-mixing it. I understand the redistribution of previously published contents as an act of metajournalism too, because the very act of sharing something with others implies the evaluative commentary that "this thing is worthy of your attention."

For example, "liking" a video on *Vimeo* is very simple and undemanding, and this act in itself is only a very blunt, unspecific expression of opinion. But this simple act still produces new information: not only can it show up on one's profile on social networking sites, drawing the attention of others to the video, but it also adds to the number of views that is displayed on the video's page - and other visitors to the site are likely to draw conclusions about that figure. I "like," therefore I metacommunicate.

More advanced forms of metajournalism make it possible to refine and explicate an expression of opinion or thoughts on something previously made available. These can range from rating articles on a predefined scale, through commenting on them and discussing about them on various forums, to using previously available articles to create something new - e.g. publishing a blog post that offers commentary and analysis to a wire report published earlier; or taking a video clip and re-using it in some creative, new way.

This is not to say that metajournalism is necessarily inferior to first order journalism, as e.g. Keen (2007, pp.46–56) would suggest. The deliberative democratic tradition stresses especially strongly the need for such reflexivity - for citizens engaging in an interpretive manner with products of the media. But this practice is important for the other two models of democracy as well: this is the process in which public opinion crystallizes, and in which public debates and discussion spring to life around issues covered in the media. Metajournalism is arguably important for the media themselves, too, because it is a tangible expression of feedback provided by less powerful actors of the public sphere. More simply: the amount of (meta-)communication about an article published earlier provides a clue as to the popularity, strengths and weaknesses of that article.

Yet it is still important to distinguish between original producers and subsequent distributors and commentators of information, because these latter *depend* on the former. The relationship is unequal. Producers don't need commentators as much as commentators need producers. The work of commentators is normatively very important for democracy - but, as a matter of fact, producers are in a more powerful, more influential position (Fenton 2010, Kreiss et al. 2010). Thus, if one were to find out who dominates the agenda, one should focus on the producers: a diversity among

secondary distributors of content can mask the fact that the same content, originating from a very small number of producers, is what is getting republished by everyone else.

This is not to mean that diversity among distributors would not be important. On the contrary; and in fact this is a key issue for social news sites, which can be understood as communities of content re-distribution. Mapping the differences between powerful, influential users of such sites, and their ordinary counterparts, has rightly been a preoccupation of studies (e.g. Hogan 2008). It might be the case that the contents of Reddit are dominated by a few hyper-active, influential users - and such a state of things would threaten the claim that such sites are operating in a substantially democratic fashion, where every user would have an equal chance of influencing the sites' contents.

In sum, "meaningful diversity" of sources would include diversity among distributors as well as diversity among original producers of articles. Accordingly, the operationalization of this measure is to acknowledge the differences between original producers and secondary sources.

### **9.3.3. Objectivity**

The meaningful, substantial realization of free speech has implications for the contents of publicly available information. These normative implications are often summarized with one term: "objectivity" (McQuail 2010, pp.200–201, Muñoz-Torres 2012). This characteristic is best understood as comprising of two overlapping, but distinct dimensions (Westerståhl 1983).

(a) First, insofar as information refers to a perceived state of things, it should be *truthful*.

As social beings, we base a great deal of our decisions on information that is made available to us, privately or publicly, by others. If this information is in a long-distance relationship with reality, then we cannot, in the long run, use it as grounds for our decisions. In order to act successfully in an environment largely outside our control, we need to know what this environment is like, so that we can anticipate the actions of others, and the consequences of our own. News should help us in this endeavour<sup>40</sup>. There should be a fundamental correspondence between news and reality as we perceive it. Or, in yet other words: "[n]ews reporting must be factual and impartial in order to provide a foundation for independent and rational decision making" (Westerståhl 1983, p.407). It is widely agreed upon that we can only ever know "truth" within certain epistemological limits, which are made especially apparent through the lens of mediated communication. Already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lippmann argued that "news and truth are not the same thing, and

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40 ...ritual models of communication (Carey 1989) notwithstanding.

must be clearly distinguished" (2004 [1921], p.194); and that the "world outside and the pictures in our heads" will always be different (ibid, p.1). Journalists can only offer a personal, imperfect, subjective interpretation of a certain event - and this interpretation is going to be re-interpreted by the readers, each getting something different out of it. Truth is always *someone's* truth.

Lippmann might have felt more than a touch of sorrow about this state of things, but he nevertheless recognized that knowledge is a relationship that involves both a knower and something that is known; a subject as well as an object. It is therefore impossible to speak of purely subjective or purely objective knowledge.

Positivist philosophers might try to equate truth with subject-invariant facts - but facts themselves are value-laden concepts, and include acts of selection (i.e. - who defines what a fact is? And *which* facts should we consider, and which ones should we ignore?). Relativists, on the other hand, might suggest that, given our inability to perceive the world without a subjective filter, all truths are in the final instance equally valid - even though this seems to fly in the face of compelling empirical evidence. (Muñoz-Torres 2012.)

Between the extremes of positivism and relativism, I believe that pragmatism offers a way out of this conundrum<sup>41</sup>. In line with Peirce's pragmatic maxim<sup>42</sup>, we can accept something as true if we see that none of the consequences of doing so will, in practice, be contradicted by perceivable evidence. To put it more simply: truth is something that we can rely on.

Thus, based on the pragmatist perspective, truthfulness can be understood as "reliability." **Truthful news articles enable their readers to make decisions based on them**, without their world falling apart. This is a requirement that **all three models of democracy** agree upon.

(b) Westerståhl's second dimension of objectivity pertains to information that refers to a *desired* state of things. Such information should be **impartial**. (Muñoz-Torres (2012) refers to this as the "ethical dimension" of objectivity.)

Truth can be an attribute of accounts of how things are. In contrast, competing ideas about how things *ought to be* cannot be evaluated using the same measure of truthfulness. It makes little sense to ask whether a certain opinion on what one should do is truthful or not. "We should turn left" is as truthful as "we should turn right."

Of course opinions tend to be tied to what are perceived as facts. Facts, for instance, can provide arguments for or against opinions: we ought to act in a particular way, *because* this is warranted by

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41 By claiming so, I disagree with Muñoz-Torres, who considers pragmatism merely a form of relativism.

42 "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." (Peirce 1986, p.266.)

a certain state of things. ("We should turn left, because we cannot turn right.") But such facts cannot, in the final instance, explain why a particular state of things is more desirable than another. With the famous phrase of Hume<sup>43</sup>, no "oughts" can be derived solely from a mere "is." - Partly because no such thing as a "mere is" exists: what we see as facts are themselves bound by our epistemological boundaries. Facts are always *someone's* facts. The mere definition of something as a "fact" includes judgements of value.

In any given society, such judgments of value can be safely assumed to vary from one individual to the next. People have different ideas regarding how things ought to be. Corresponding to the principle of representation in free speech, impartiality or ethical objectivity suggests that the largest possible variety of these ideas should be given public expression. Primarily, this is important because in a democracy, everyone has the right to have their views represented in public. But it is not only those whose views are represented that stand to benefit; it is everybody else, too. Other things being equal, it is better to be aware of a larger variety of opinions on how things ought to be, because a larger pool of opinion offers more personal choices, and better ways to evaluate and reflect on one's own opinions. Standing on this common ground, different models of democracy formulate different criteria of impartiality.

(a) **Liberal-individualist** democracy champions the value of impartiality: everyone should *be able to* have their opinion publicly represented in and by the media (see Wessler 2008, pp.3–4). All opinions are equal in the sense that the *values* that underline them are, in the final instance, equally justifiable. All opinions are not equal insofar as they are based on, or motivated by perceived facts, that can be truthful and erroneous to a varying degree. In this latter sense, an opinion can clearly be wrong. (I have the right to assert that the Moon should be mined for Swiss cheese, but, in the light of ample evidence we recognize as truthful, this assertion will be very much mistaken.) But *wrong* opinions are just as important to be represented in the media, for three reasons. First - the right to representation should, for this vision of democracy, be an absolute. Second - wrong opinions can be used to strengthen right ones (i.e. ones based on information that is more truthful). And third - as pragmatism has it, our knowledge is always partial and fallible, thus, what we know to be truthful today might change tomorrow. Whatever we know will always be contingent - and this sense of contingency should always be kept in mind.

Realistically, impartiality can only ever be measured within certain practical boundaries. Every single different strand of opinion cannot possibly be represented in the mass media. It might seem that the best we can aim for is the representation of a handful of mainstream alternatives - just

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43 Quoted in Kleinberg 1991, p.14.

numerous enough that the largest part of the polity can subscribe to them after making reasonable compromises. Yet it would be wrong to suppose that such "mainstream opinions" are the only ones that matter, by virtue of their popularity. As Downey (2007) emphasises, the public sphere should not be accepted as something static: "fringe opinions" should be given the opportunity to become mainstream. Liberalism, *per se*, is not interested in upsetting the status quo - but neither is it interested in safeguarding it. Minorities' voices should be heard just as well.

(b) The **communitarian-republican** model is ambivalent about impartiality.

On the one hand, the principle of free speech is as important for it as it is for liberal individualism. On the other hand, it considers the notion of community as a common good that is even more important - because the community is the *source* and guarantee of basic rights - including that to free speech. Therein lies an obvious tension. Is free speech only free as long as it steers well clear from interfering with communal values?

Etzioni suggests that this tension could be resolved if we don't confine the problem exclusively to the domain of law (1998b, p.xviii). It should certainly be *legal* to have any kind of view represented in the mass media, including ones that actively discourage participation in community affairs, or try to disrupt the community in some other way. But being legal does not necessarily mean being normatively desired, and, accordingly, communitarianism emphasises the importance of *non-legal* measures to promote what *is* desired.

Such considerations suggest that, depending on the context, a certain degree of bias in the contents of social news sites might not only be acceptable but also desired. As I've argued before, context-sensitivity is paramount for communitarianism - especially since "community" can be defined on many different levels. These considerations suggest that impartiality be measured through a number of different content dimensions.

For instance, when considering a political debate, it seems straightforward to measure impartiality with regard to the different parties involved, and their respective positions. Parties to the debate put forward competing ideas, which should be given equal attention (unless these ideas are hostile to the common good of community itself, in which case they are to be handled with extra care).

But impartiality can also be measured through another dimension, which concerns the role of media in participation in the life of the community. Should the media be slanted towards promoting such participation? Or should they leave this up to the citizens themselves to decide?

Communitarianism argues that what I call the *constitutive* segment of media should support and promote community participation (Etzioni 1999). Since Reddit potentially offers a compilation of

all kinds of media, it seems reasonable to formulate the demand that some portion of their overall output should, indeed, be biased, towards such views which advocate participation.

(c) Impartiality in the presentation of opinions is very important for **deliberative democracy** too. Deliberative democrats emphasise the need for a diversity of opinions – including such views that are based on facts that cannot be recognized as truthful –, because such diversity is the precondition of debate.

But if diversity is a necessary precondition, it is insufficient in itself. We need to go beyond that, because the concept of diversity suggests difference, but difference does not necessarily mean opposition or contradiction.

"Two opposing points of view are necessarily different, and thus diverse, but the inverse is not necessarily true. Two individuals might have different perspectives on the same subject, understand one another and conduct fertile and enriching discussion about this subject, without the discussion ever including any of them criticising the other, either in factual or normative terms. It might just be that the two individuals see different, but non-contradictory aspects of the problem, because their respective predecessors, cultures and positions sensitize them to different dimensions." (Manin 2004, p.186, my translation.)

If deliberation is based on such a pool of information and opinions which does not contain contradicting positions, it is likely to be flawed, "insufficient, or at least biased" (ibid, p.187). This is because it will become impossible to appropriately evaluate various positions, and thus to find the best arguments. The merits and flaws of any given position can only be highlighted when put into contrast with alternatives - which, necessarily, have to be contrary. The absence of such contradiction is likely to lead to faulty deliberation, which does not do a good job in finding out what the best arguments are. In such deliberation, where opinions get unquestionably, uncritically accepted, opinions are likely to polarize, instead of converging.

Manin points out that this line of argument finds support by the phenomenon identified by cognitive science as confirmatory bias: our tendency to interpret balanced or inconclusive information as supportive of our existing beliefs, regardless of what these beliefs are (Lord et al. 1979).

Confirmatory bias is an obvious impediment to deliberation; or, to put it another way, the goal of deliberation is precisely to counter the effects of confirmatory bias - to make participants carefully evaluate the information at hand, and to modify their views accordingly. According to Lord, Ross and Preston, the best way to achieve this lies in pointing out to participants in a discussion where new pieces of information contradict their existing beliefs: "Individuals who are induced to consider the opposite [...] display less bias in social judgment" (1984, p.1231).

All this suggests that contradiction is also necessary condition for deliberation. Thus, the deliberative model of democracy expects social news sites to offer not only diverse, but also contrary information to its audience - so that they become able to adequately evaluate competing positions<sup>44</sup>, and thus to filter them based on the arguments that support and oppose them.

#### 9.3.4. Comprehensive temporal orientation

Immediacy, the possibility to allow readers to receive news in almost real time, is a prominent feature of online news (Karlsson 2012, p.387, Salaverria 2005). There is some disagreement as to the extent that this potential is actualized (Lim 2012), but there are numerous examples illustrating how online news services can outperform traditional media in terms of speed (if not accuracy). In the particular case of Reddit, the Aurora movie theatre shooting<sup>45</sup>, and the manhunt for the 2013 Boston Marathon bombers<sup>46</sup> are notable examples of the site acting as a real-time source of news. In both cases, redditors posted and continuously updated information as it became available via other web services (e.g. Twitter), and directly from other redditors.

Elections typically run according to a stable schedule. But even anticipated events can take unexpected turns, and, naturally, unforeseen but important developments can always occur, suggesting that immediacy would be a welcome quality of election coverage too.

At the very least, news about elections should enable voters to be *reasonably* up-to-date, at least to the extent that they are rendered capable of making an informed decision about the *current* candidates, in the *current* situation. This is a trivial requirement shared by all models of democracy.

But an exclusively short-term focus on current events leaves something to be desired. It would be ideal if news combined the focus on the here-and-now with a broader, historical context. Taking a long-term, historical perspective could enable better reflection about persistent issues, and, arguably, a better evaluation of persons who have been involved in politics for a longer period of time. There might be nothing less worthy than yesterday's news - but ideally, it would still be important to revisit past news, so that we are better equipped to understand the implications of current ones.

Specifically, in the case of US elections, it is noteworthy that the official campaign season (after the two main parties' respective conventions at the end of summer) is preceded by a lengthy primary election season, where several voters get the first chance to get to know the candidates.

Reflections on issues and personal characteristics of candidates that may become decisive begins in

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44 This idea has informed several institutions before: consider e.g. the Roman Catholic Church's idea of "the devil's advocate."

45 [http://www.reddit.com/r/news/comments/wv8t1/comprehensive\\_timeline\\_aurora\\_massacre/](http://www.reddit.com/r/news/comments/wv8t1/comprehensive_timeline_aurora_massacre/)

46 [http://www.reddit.com/r/news/comments/1cp0oh/live\\_boston\\_update\\_thread\\_part\\_6/](http://www.reddit.com/r/news/comments/1cp0oh/live_boston_update_thread_part_6/)

the primary season. That is a good reason to return to coverage of pre-elections in the actual campaign season too.

Sites such as Reddit certainly have the capacity to combine long- and short-term orientation in their coverage. When compiling news, redditors are free to utilize the whole of the web as archives, and to submit whatever piece of information they consider relevant, regardless of its original publication date. Traditional media are forced to produce new contents every day, but Reddit can feed off existing sources without a problem. The advantages might not be so obvious as in the case of immediacy, but in the specific case of elections, the "timeless" nature of Reddit is an important factor to consider.

I propose the term "comprehensive temporal orientation" to encapsulate both immediacy and timelessness, both short- and long-term orientation of social news sites. Achieving this would be a **boon for all models of democracy**.

However, *failing* to achieve it might not have very serious consequences, in contrast, for instance, to the lack of impartiality, which is an essential quality of *constitutive* media's election coverage. Specifically, if short-term orientation is found to dominate, lacking a historical perspective, that in itself would hardly render Reddit's performance undemocratic. But I would argue that an opportunity was missed. In contrast, if long-term orientation was found to dominate, without substantial attention to current developments, that would spell trouble. It would mean that those relying on Reddit as their sole source of information might not be able to relate to the current situation.

#### **9.3.5. Civility**

Following Papacharissi (2004), I understand civility as "deference to the social and democratic identity of an individual." In the practical context of the journalistic content of Reddit, this translates to the publication of texts that do not threaten or discourage anyone, regardless of their views, from taking part in the political process. This is an important feature of public debates for two of the three models of democracy I discuss, the **liberal-individualist** model being the exception.

All models of democracy recognize that legal limits of free speech should be drawn as broadly as possible, certainly allowing for journalistic publications that show little respect for any particular group of people or their opinions. However, it should be considered that such texts have potentially negative effects. They can create a climate of opinion in which groups or individuals will feel



excluded. The lack of standards regulating the manner and forms of public discussion can thus result in particular individuals' and groups' freedom of expression being *practically*, if not theoretically, curbed via discursive exclusion. Furthermore, the acerbic, hostile tone of public discussion can even discourage those from public participation who are themselves not targeted by any of the disrespectful remarks (Castells 2007). These are unwelcome phenomena from the point of view of any kind of democracy.

But the problem is that imposing limits of discursive civility *also* means practically curbing the freedom of expression - namely, of those who are labelled uncivil. For the liberal-individualist model of democracy, allowing incivility, and its potential negative effects, is the lesser of two evils here. In fact, it is not necessarily an evil at all: for liberalism, the constant probing of boundaries is a very important activity:

"The civility movement is deeply at odds with what an invigorated liberalism requires: intellectual clarity; an insistence upon grappling with the substance of controversies; and a willingness to fight loudly, openly, militantly, even rudely for policies and values that will increase freedom, equality and happiness [...]" (Kennedy 1998, p.5.)

Freedom, in other words, is noisy and messy, and we have no choice but to put up with it.

But **deliberative democrats, and, especially, communitarians, beg to differ**. For these latter two models, offensive, uncivil talk in public political discussions, while *legally* acceptable, is definitely not desirable. This is because at the heart of civility lies the thought that the fundamental equality, as well as the potentially fundamental difference, between each citizen should be recognized. Freedom is important - but not more important than equality. In order for everyone to be practically able to partake in public discussions, it is necessary to observe some basic rules concerning discursive forms and practices.

Civility does not simply mean *politeness*. It is not simply about being nice to each other (see Papacharissi 2004, Goode & McKee 2013, but cf. Ferree et al. 2002, Wessler 2008). Civil, democratic talk has the potential of being impolite, offensive, ugly- but it still needs to respect the identity and opinions of others. At the same time, being polite does not guarantee being democratic: consider "politically correct" terms such as "collateral damage," or "the land of haves and soon-to-haves". Perhaps the dividing line between impolite and uncivil messages is blurred. It is, then, all the more important to find it.

The bottom line is that *incivility*, as *potential verbal exclusion* of others from the democratic process (see Goode et al. 2011, p.604), is not to be tolerated by communitarian and deliberative democracy.

### 9.3.6. Reasoned argumentation

Offering justifications for various positions in a debate is "a central and necessary ingredient of any form of deliberation" (Wessler 2008, p.10), because it is through the evaluative comparison of these justifications that we can decide what position is likeliest to lead to the best outcome. In the problem-driven perspective of deliberation, politics is about comparing possible solution alternatives in order to find the best one; it is impossible to do so without justifications for each alternative solution. We need relevant reasons; we need to know *why* any given position should be supported in a debate. Deliberation, then, serves to find the best reasons.

In this thesis, I use the term **argument**, or **line of argument**, to demarcate such claims which justify taking various positions by **providing a reason** for doing so.

So far, so uncontroversial. What is less straightforward, however, is whether or not deliberative democracy should erect a barrier of rationality around acceptable arguments.

In this study, I answer this question with a sound "no," and propose a formal definition of acceptable justification to be broad and lenient, **including any kind of reasons**, however outrageous, silly, unrealistic, or irrational. So long as an intelligible claim can be interpreted as providing a reason for taking a particular position in the debate surrounding the election, it is accepted as a valid argument.

Outrageous, silly or unrealistic reasons are unlikely to support considered positions of opinion. But I argue that such reasons in public deliberation are at least *potentially* important, insofar as they invite criticism, and prompt participants of the debate to propose *better* arguments.

In his study of online discussions, Wilhelm (2000) adheres closely to a strict reading of Habermas. He quotes a message, lifted from a discussion forum, that describes presidential candidate Bob Dole as "boring, gray, uncharismatic," and that suggests that his rival (Bill Clinton) should instead be voted for. According to Wilhelm: "[i]n terms of the rationality of the message, it clearly fails Habermas's [...] test of providing reasons to validate the truth assertions made about Dole's character and Clinton's personality" (2000, p.96). Perhaps the quote fails Habermas's test - but it passes mine, as it clearly does provide a reason for a suggested course of action, and at the same time invites questions about whether one's personality is a relevant factor in their assessment as a presidential candidate.

To repeat, I take inspiration from Habermas in developing a two-track model of deliberative

democracy, because such a model proposes a way to bridge the gap between normative theorizing and empirical applicability. But I do not accept his concept of communicative rationality. In my interpretation, communicative rationality is the factor that, for Habermas, guarantees the theoretical possibility of reaching rational consensus. I don't accept this guarantee - or, rather, I expect that the consensus that can be reached solely on the basis of all human beings sharing the universal faculty of language and "orientation to intersubjectivity" is so broad as to be practically meaningless. Thus, my decision not to include a criterion of rationality in my model of deliberative democracy falls in line with this rejection.

### **9.3.7. Reflexivity (internal & external)**

When describing an action, the adjective "reflexive" can mean "performed as a reflex, without conscious thought." But the word is also used in the exact opposite sense, denoting e.g. an opinion that is thoughtful, carefully considered, and self-conscious, in the sense of being aware of alternatives. Reflexivity implies the critical scrutiny of one's own's views, as well as that of others. It is in this latter sense that I use the term.

Reflection is an important constituent of deliberation. Through the deliberative process, participants are expected to develop thoughts and opinions, and/or to modify their existing views according to compelling new arguments - which is impossible to do without being reflexive. And, as suggested above, the deliberative model of democracy *expects the public sphere to ensure the formation of a plurality of considered ("reflected-upon") opinions*.

(a) Reflexivity thus understood is at the heart of social news sites. Their filtering and aggregating work could be described as a simple act of reflection on the media: picking out bits and pieces from their total output, and considering whether or not they are worthy of attention. Importantly, such reflexivity is not exercised by automated news aggregators, e.g. by *Google News*, which produce a compilation of news based on the popularity of previously published articles, as opposed to the meaning of their contents. The very point of being reflexive would be not to accept a piece of news automatically as relevant and important just because it attracted the most clicks from users. Various metrics of popularity, as measured by robots, say very little about the contents of articles.

Reddit uses human beings as editors, and from this fact alone, we can be certain that at least some, if not necessarily deep, thought informs its work. It is safe to assume that most people, most of the time, will not bother trying to participate in the creative process of editing a social news site without

good reasons for doing so, and the existence of said reasons implies a degree of reflection. Having said all this- we can never be sure what really motivates the work of social news site editors (but see a forthcoming paper by Bogers & Wernersen (n.d.)), and we have to entertain the possibility that their reflections are quite shallow, in the sense that their reasons for contributing are not tied to the evaluation of the contents of the articles they edit. For example, one might submit an article without even reading it, relying on some external clue in deciding whether it is good or not. In this case, the human editor would not be altogether that different from a news aggregating robot. Thankfully, in the analysis of the contents of social news sites, we can find a proxy that can indicate, at least loosely, just how reflexive their editors had been. I refer to the reflexivity of redditors as "**internal**" **reflexivity**: i.e., internal to the site.

(b) But reflexive thinking should not be the privilege of redditors: it should just as well characterize the work of those journalists who provide the raw material for Reddit. In other words, articles published on Reddit should themselves be reflexive. This implies that they do not only present different (and contrary) opinions, backed up by various justifications, but also that they reflect upon, or critically engage with, these.

Unsurprisingly, the idea that deliberation involves not only the co-presence of different positions, but also their productive interaction, is a standard feature of attempts to conceptualize and measure deliberation. For instance, as Ferree et al. argue, deliberativeness requires that those involved "take seriously and respond to the arguments of others" (Ferree et al. 2002, p.240). According to Wessler, the deliberative exchange of ideas must involve "actively engaging with [others'] positions and justifications by rebutting them and/or refining one's own arguments" (2008, p.4). In their model of deliberation, expanding on the review of eight previous attempts by various scholars, Janssen and Kies (2005, p.40) mention reciprocity - "the degree to which a conversation is real 'discussion' " - at the first place. And, of course, the same idea is implied by Manin's call for positions to be evaluated against each other.

I refer to this aspect of reflexivity as **external**; i.e. external to Reddit, and beyond the control of redditors. Reflexivity thus understood is a basic requirement of deliberative democracy.

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#### **9.4. The interactional dimension**

From the third of Dahlgren's analytical perspectives, Reddit is an online space for interaction. Within this dimension, Dahlgren (2005, p.149) distinguishes between user-to-media and user-to-

user interaction. In the case of Reddit, I treat these two kinds of interaction as two aspects of the same set of phenomena, because this sites approximate the ideal that Bruns (2005) refers to as "produsage:" users are producers, and producers are users. Interacting with a social news site means interacting with other users - at once producers and audiences.

Some aspect of this interaction are captured across other analytical dimensions. Looking at sites' structural features (Chapter 9.2), I explore their functional interactivity: how users can access them, modify their contents, and what technological features they offer for user-to-user communication. Looking at their representative function (9.3), I examine whether some of their users seem to be more influential sources of information than others. In contrast, here I focus on the discussions among users: how redditors interact using the site as a message board. In this capacity, Reddit constitutes a repository of textual artefacts that are at once vehicles and recorded documents of user-to-user interaction.

My conceptualization of high-quality, democratic discussions is derived from theoretical discussions of the three ideal models, and building on previous work by Freelon (2010), Trénel (2004), Janssen and Kies (2005) and others. It formulates requirements concerning the level and structure of discursive interaction (9.4.1, 9.4.2), as well as its contents, focusing on its adherence to norms of civility (9.4.5), the diversity of represented views (9.4.3), and the presence of reasoned, reflexive argumentation (9.4.6 - 9.4.7).

#### **9.4.1. Level of participation**

Any kind of participation on Reddit is voluntary. What gets submitted, voted and commented on is entirely up to the users. That users do comment on articles, and conduct a discussion, is desirable for all three models of democracy, although from slightly different reasons.

As far as the **liberal-individualist** model is concerned, such discussions are contributions to a meaningful realization of the principle of free expression. Commenting publicly on articles is one way to realize citizens' three "information and cultural resources" of information (asking questions, taking advantage of the contribution of other users), representation (of one's own perspective on a contentious issue), and participation (subjecting the views available to critique) (Murdock 2012)<sup>47</sup>. The absence of public discussions about politics in general, let alone about something as important

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<sup>47</sup> Arguably, Graham Murdock's own interpretation of democracy would probably be much more demanding than that of liberal individualism, but I find his summary of the very basic, minimal requirements concerning communication in democracy succinct and elegant - which is why I keep citing it in a context that he himself might find alien.

as a presidential election, would be a sign of grave problems within the political public sphere. (Which is not to say that the presence of such discussions guarantees that there are no problems whatsoever - public debate is a necessary, but not sufficient condition of a healthy public sphere.)

For the **communitarian-republican** model, public discussions are *also* important because of their role to foster communal ties, and because they thus provide citizens with an opportunity to honour their civic responsibilities.

The communitarian-republican model attributes primary importance to the community of citizens of the nation state, because it is the institution of the nation state that provides the framework for the legal, political, economic and cultural organization of society. You might be a horticulturalist, a policeman, a trainspotter, a Beatles-fan and an angling enthusiast, but overlapping all these group memberships lies your identity as a citizen, and thus being a member of a political community. This membership provides you with certain rights, but it also imposes responsibilities, notably: for maintaining this political community through participation - possibly through participation in public debates about the upcoming presidential election. A total absence of such discussions would be, for the communitarian-republican model, a disaster.

There is an additional, although at the time of writing somewhat speculative, communitarian argument for the case of measuring the intensity of discussions.

There seems to be a correlation between online and offline political participation, especially among young people (Östman 2012). So far we have limited evidence as to whether there is a causal relationship between online and offline participation, and if so, in which direction(s) it runs. But plausible explanations suggest that online participation contributes to offline political participation, e.g. by enhancing one's sense of psychological empowerment (Leung 2009), or by nurturing generalizable skills, such as critical thinking (Jenkins 2006, pp.245–247). This would be a welcome development for the case of communitarian-republican democracy.

Finally, **the deliberative model** considers public political discussions about elections crucially important. As argued in Chapter 6.4., this model recognizes both the limited potential of popular, public deliberation, and its responsibility in elections. It considers unrealistic to expect citizens to get informed about every little nuance of policy proposals, or to educate themselves so that they understand the intricacies of finance markets in order to judge candidates' positions on the economy. But it does not consider unrealistic to expect citizens to develop their opinions based on arguments, as made available to them by the media and other actors of the political public sphere. Neither is it unrealistic to expect citizens to participate in mediated deliberation: that is, as long as they decide to

vote, to make their minds up after considering the public debates that the media, and more active citizens, are conducting for them.

Public discussions on social news sites are one of the potential sites of such deliberative opinion-formation; thus it is worth asking the question: are such discussions happening at all?

#### **9.4.2. Discursive interactivity**

In a setting of two conversational partners, Rafaeli (1988, pp.118–119) distinguishes between mere two-way communication (where participants do not take into consideration one another's utterances), reactive communication (where one of the participants reacts to the other, but the chain of reactions stops there), and truly interactive communication - where participants take into consideration previous messages, and also the ways in which previous messages related to even earlier ones. This last one is the sense in which I use the term.

The presence of a lot of talk does not necessarily mean that any kind of discussion is going on - that participants address each other, listen to (read) each other's contributions, and reflect on those. But truly interactive discussions are important for certain interpretations of democracy.

...the **liberal-individualist** one not being one of them. This model wholly accommodates monologues, and does not stipulate requirements suggesting that participants to discussions should actually listen to each other. Of course doing so would not be a bad thing, but the substantial benefits of public discussions are realized already if participants only make their own voice heard - and leave the interaction at that. Citizens should be able to engage in dialogues with others, if they so desire - but they should also be able not to do so, if they consider it unnecessary. So long as people participate, participants' rights are exercised, and the pool of available views and information is potentially expanded, being to the benefit of everyone. This is sufficient.

In strong contrast to the above, the **communitarian-republican** model sets an additional goal to public exchanges of information: that participants listen and reply to each other, thereby realizing community in communication - offering an everyday, practical proof and manifestation of the common ground on which every citizen stands. While the liberal-individualist model suggests that people exercising their right to information (listening to others) is a welcome phenomenon, the communitarian interpretation of democracy suggests that doing so would not only be appreciated but also necessary. Having the (negative) freedom to speak one's mind only ever means something if there are fellow citizens who actually listen. Measuring the extent to which participants in online

conversations reply to each other is a proxy to estimate the amount of attention that participants are paying to each other.

The **deliberative** model also considers the existence of dialogues in conversations essential. This model does not assert that there is an ethical imperative of listening to others; instead, it emphasises that deliberative conversations are about critically evaluating each other's contributions - because this is the only way that the best solution to problems can be found (see chapter 9.3., Manin 2004, Wessler 2008). Such critical evaluation, with the ensuing refinement of arguments, and elimination of those that were found faulty, cannot happen if participants in a discussion are talking in parallel, without paying attention to what others are saying.

#### 9.4.3. Opinion presence and diversity

The presence and diversity of opinions in online political conversations is important for all three models of democracy studied, although not uniformly so, and not for the exact same reasons.

For **liberalism**, the public availability of diverse opinions is important, because it testifies to the practical feasibility of having one's opinion represented in public. (This assertion assumes that there will be differences among people with regards to their opinions, but in a complex, modern, multi-ethnic and religiously divided society that relies on an economy of scarce resources, this is a safe assumption to make.) Formal censorship, online moderation, structural features of discussion sites, or peer pressure are some of the factors that can lead to opinions being suppressed. In the liberal perspective, this would debilitate the whole community - but even if this was not the case, such suppression, such exclusion of voices should be fought on the principle of reasonable pluralism.

In the case of the **communitarian-republican** model, we are facing an ambiguous picture. On the one hand, communitarians recognize the importance of public opinion diversity just as much as liberals do. On the other hand, given the role of the political public sphere in forging community ties through discussion, it also calls for the preferential treatment of views supporting this goal, to the detriment of positions that advocate extreme individualism. The role of the public sphere is not only to "chasten our political institutions and support practical alternatives to the status quo," but also to provide a "protective arena" in which citizens of common interests and views can find each other, bond with each other, and develop communities (Wilhelm 2000, p.29). In the particular case of presidential election, the *relevant community* in question is that of the whole nation. I attempt to



resolve this ambiguity through the considerate operationalizing of this measure.

For **deliberative** democracy, the question of opinion diversity is especially interesting. The deliberative process does not only require views to be heard, but also that *opposing (contrary)* views are heard - so that every position is questioned and critically evaluated. In the case of elections, deliberative opinion-formation is the responsibility of the political public sphere - thus the same regulative principle applies to the discussion of election-related content on Reddit.

#### **9.4.4. Truthfulness**

As in the context of articles, I understand truthfulness here as *reliability* (see chapter 9.3.3/a). Should comments in discussions be truthful? A simple answer to this question is likely to be insufficient.

(a) It is important to distinguish between the primary (articles) and secondary (discussions) contents of Reddit, and regard them as two different genres. The key difference is between their *modes of address* (Williams 1977). Discussions are informal and open, inviting the contribution of anyone, regardless of whether they have any recognizable claim to authority over the topic that is being discussed; and because of this fact, they do not anticipate the same reactions from their audience as traditional newspaper articles do.

This mode of address affords discussions laxer standards of quality. No right-minded democrat would suggest that citizens should only be allowed to participate with contributions that are labelled true or officially correct. Much of what is being said in online conversations is inaccurate, exaggerated, poetic, playful, whimsical, absurd or incomprehensible - and rightly so. The informational resources of participation and representation are perhaps most important when citizens use them to "achieve self-understanding" (Gonzalez-Bailon et al. 2010, p.230, Habermas 2004, p.308), to get a better sense of what they think themselves, through formulating their uncertain thoughts and sharing it with others, often in playful forms of discursive rituals. Writing about users' comments on YouTube, Goode et al. note that:

"the serious and the frivolous, the rational and the emotive, the civic and the carnivalesque, are not so easily prised apart. [...] Deliberation and dialogue are certainly part of the picture, but this cannot possibly be untangled from the gamesmanship, the ritual, the identity play, the conflicts and pleasures that have already become so deeply woven into the fabric of this still young platform" (2011, p.612.)

The same applies to social news websites. Although commenting on articles could be understood as

an act of journalism, commenting and writing articles are different genres; consequently, the standards of quality by which they are to be judged should differ. This is evidently recognized by publishers - as proven by the practice of separating, visually and structurally, comments from articles -, and I argue that if it is not recognized intuitively by readers of news - then it *should* be.

However, just because untruthful comments are allowed, this doesn't mean that the absence of truthful ones would be desired. In particular, there is an obvious way in which social news sites can help the case of democratic journalism - namely, if members of the audience **use the comments to point out and correct flaws of articles**. This would be a boon for any model of democracy.

(b) The concept of truthfulness is relevant in particular for deliberative democracy for another reason too. Namely, the deliberative model expects discussions in the public sphere to help generate considered opinions, together with *constitutive* media. This necessitates that such arguments surface through discussions which are based on truthful assertions.

Again, this idea shouldn't be used to justify censorship of misinformed opinions. Deliberation should start by assigning an equal potential value to *any* argument that is made - because the value of any argument is actually learned through deliberation, through the reflexive critique of any one claim through other, competing ones. Deliberation should enable us to *learn* which arguments are truthful, and which ones are not.

Thus, **for the deliberative model, it would be important that *some* truthful arguments emerge** from discussions - as well as ones that are less-than-truthful.

#### 9.4.5. Civility

The same principles apply here as described under 9.3.5., regarding civility in the primary contents of Reddit. Conversational partners should observe certain standards of discursive behaviour: while not necessarily being polite, they should acknowledge and respect the differences among themselves, instead of ignoring them, or eliminating them via discursive exclusion. But this criterion only pertains to the **communitarian-republican** and **deliberative** models, not for the liberal-individualist variant.

#### 9.4.6. Reasoned argumentation

A constitutive, central feature of deliberation is that participants justify their positions with arguments - reasons for their suggested course of action -, so that such a position can be found which is supported by the best arguments. This requirement of deliberation is explored in detail in Chapter 9.3.6. The same principle applies here as in the analytical dimension of representation. As

also explained there, I set the barrier of acceptable justifications very low: any intelligible claim that can be recognized as a justification for a particular position in a debate is admitted. Low-quality, non-generalizable, irrational or weak arguments are also important in a debate - because their presence invites critique and permits reflection.

#### **9.4.7. Reflexivity**

As explained in detail under 9.3.7., another constitutive feature of deliberation is that participants holding opposing opinions exchange their thoughts, and reflect on one another's, as well as their own, arguments.

The analysis of comments in discussion threads, together with the analysis of the structure of interaction (Chapter 9.4.2) provides one way to analyse whether or not participants representing different positions in a debate engage in discussion with each other. That they do so is an important requirement for the deliberative model of democracy.

\* \* \*

#### **9.5. Summary and differences between models**

Table 4 sums up normative requirements of Reddit as *constitutive* media outlet, set by the three different models of democracy.

Analytical perspective:	<b>Liberal-individualist democracy</b> - public sphere as a free marketplace of ideas -	<b>Communitarian-republican democracy</b> - ambivalent public sphere -	<b>Deliberative democracy</b> - public sphere as source of a plurality of considered opinion -
<b>Structural</b>	<p><b>Ownership and business model</b> should enable democratic performance.</p> <p>Structural features of the site should render it <b>accessible</b> to users: barriers to use should be low; no systematic exclusion of users should be possible; there should be as little censorship as possible.</p> <p>Structural features of the site should enable a meaningful <b>diversity of sources</b>, as well as <b>meaningful functional interactivity</b>.</p>	<p>As in the liberal-individualist model, plus:</p> <p>Structures should <b>both enable and limit the potential fragmentation</b> of audiences (subject to context-dependent review).</p>	<p>As in the liberal-individualist model, plus:</p> <p>Structures should <b>limit the potential fragmentation of audiences</b>.</p>
<b>Representational</b>	<p><b>Contents</b> of Reddit should exhibit meaningful <b>diversity</b>.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should originate from a <b>diverse set of sources</b>.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should be <b>truthful</b> - in the pragmatic sense of being reliable.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should be <b>impartial</b> through representing a broad range of alternative opinions.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should exhibit <b>comprehensive temporal orientation</b>: covering current developments but also mindful of a historical perspective, revisiting older, persistent issues.</p>	<p><b>Contents</b> of Reddit should exhibit meaningful <b>diversity</b>.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should originate from a <b>diverse set of sources</b>.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should be <b>truthful</b> - in the pragmatic sense of being reliable.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should represent a <b>broad range of opinions</b>; but they should also be biased towards <b>promoting and enabling activism</b> and political participation.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should exhibit <b>comprehensive temporal orientation</b>.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should demonstrate basic <b>civility</b>, understood as the lack of verbal exclusion.</p>	<p><b>Contents</b> of Reddit should exhibit meaningful <b>diversity</b>.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should originate from a <b>diverse set of sources</b>.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should be <b>truthful</b> - in the pragmatic sense of being reliable.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should represent a <b>broad range of alternative and contrary</b> opinions, so that every position in a debate is questioned.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should exhibit <b>comprehensive temporal orientation</b>.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should introduce <b>arguments (reasons)</b> for positions they advocate.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should exhibit <b>reflexivity</b>, understood as critical engagement with various points of view.</p> <p>Contents of Reddit should demonstrate basic <b>civility</b>, understood as the lack of verbal exclusion.</p>
<b>Interactional</b>	<p>Users of Reddit should <b>participate in commentary</b> about the sites' primary contents.</p> <p>Users' comments should represent a variety of <b>diverse opinions</b>.</p> <p><i>Although users' comments are not expected to be truthful in every case, it would be appreciated if they helped correct untruthful articles.</i></p>	<p>Users of Reddit should <b>participate in commentary</b> about the sites' primary contents.</p> <p>Conversations on Reddit demonstrate <b>discursive interactivity</b>: active dialogue with other participants.</p> <p>Users' comments should represent a <b>variety of diverse opinions</b>; but they should also be biased towards <b>promoting and enabling political participation</b>.</p> <p>Users should respect basic norms of <b>civility</b>, prohibiting potential verbal exclusion of others.</p> <p><i>It would be appreciated if comments helped correct untruthful articles.</i></p>	<p>Users of Reddit should <b>participate in commentary</b> about the sites' primary contents.</p> <p>Conversations on Reddit demonstrate <b>discursive interactivity</b>: active dialogue with other participants.</p> <p>Users' comments should represent a <b>variety of diverse and contrary opinions</b>.</p> <p>Users should provide <b>arguments (reasons)</b> for the positions they represent in their discussion. Some of these arguments should be <b>truthful</b>.</p> <p>Users should observe <b>reflexivity</b> in the debate, understood here as critical engagement with various positions in the discussion.</p> <p>Users should respect basic norms of <b>civility</b>, prohibiting potential verbal exclusion of others.</p> <p><i>It would be appreciated if comments helped correct untruthful articles.</i></p>

Table 4. Conceptualization of Reddit as a constitutive outlet

A summary of **key points of difference** between the liberal-individualist (LI), communitarian-republican (CR) and deliberative (DD) conceptual models follows, once again taking each analytical perspective in turn.

(a) **Structures.** LI is not concerned about how social news sites might help or hinder audience fragmentation. CR is ambiguous: some fragmentation is healthy. DD: audience fragmentation is a threat - we should have coherent debates involving everyone.

(b) **Representation.** All three models agree that the contents of Reddit should represent a broad range of opinions, with a comprehensive temporal orientation. But CR also demands bias towards the promotion and support of political activism, while DD suggests that not only diverse, but also contrary opinions should be represented.

CR and DD suggest that basic norms of civility are observed, making sure that the contents of Reddit do not lead to the discursive exclusion of anyone. For LI, such norms of civility are suspicious, potential impediments to the full realization of the principle of free expression. Finally, DD also requires that contents of SN introduce justifications (arguments) for the positions they advocate, and that the contents of SN demonstrate reflexivity, understood here as critical engagement with, and review of, alternative positions.

(c) **Interaction.** All three models agree that users' participation in commentary about Reddit's primary contents is desirable. CR and DD also demands that dialogical discourse develops among commenters - that they actually respond to one another's claims. This feature of discussions is referred to as *discursive interactivity*.

The three models also agree that users' comments should represent a variety of diverse opinions. But CR is biased towards the promotion and support of political activism, while DD demands that not only diverse, but also contrary opinions are voiced.

CR and DD require that basic norms of civility are observed, eliminating the danger of verbal exclusion. This is not a concern for LI.

DD requires that users provide justifications for the positions they advocate, and that discussions exhibit reflexivity, understood here as critical engagement with, and review of, alternative positions. Finally, with regard to truthfulness, each of the three models agree that comments acting as a corrective to untruthful articles would be a welcome phenomenon - although it is not expected that

comments should *only* put forward truthful assertions. In addition, DD requires that commenters also put forward arguments relying on truthful assertions.

Perhaps the most obvious feature of Table 4 is how similar the columns are. Few practical differences seem to exist between the three democratic visions, with regard to how Reddit as *constitutive* media outlet should function.

That these visions are similar is a conceptual necessity. After all, they all represent models of *democracy* - it is only within the limits of this concept that various interpretations can differ. In addition, the picture presented by this paper can be misleading, because it examines various models of democracy from one particular perspective - that of the media. It is likely that other, non-media-focused perspectives would reveal other, perhaps more striking, differences between the models. At the same time, I argue that the differences, though few in numbers, are meaningful and important - given both their practical implications, and their respective theoretical backgrounds.

## Chapter 10. Operationalization of normative requirements

### 10.1. The context of the 2012 election

In the previous chapters, I've conceptualized what models of democracy expect from Reddit as a constitutive media organ in its coverage of elections. In this chapter I translate the normative concepts into operational measures, exploring all three analytical dimensions separately, choosing methods most appropriate for each of them.

In order to do so, I specify a particular context in which the analysis is to take place; namely, the 2012 presidential election in the US. I have four sets of reasons for choosing this particular case as the object of my analysis.

(a) **Relevance.** The POTUS is a figure of actual as well as symbolic power - arguably, the single most important democratically elected leader today. More importantly, US presidential elections tend to be *perceived* as important, attracting significant media coverage, which lends itself to normative analysis.

(b) **Tradition.** The coverage of US presidential elections has been the subject of media scholars' attention for decades - a landmark study is that of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1968 [1944]), a recent example is provided by Stern and Rookey (2012). This suggests that other studies could be used as comparative context for the evaluation of my findings.

(c) **Locality.** Reddit is based in the US, and so are most of its users (Duggan & Smith 2013), therefore it's reasonable to expect that the election attracts considerable attention by redditors.

(d) **Convenience.** The de facto two-party system in the US provides a context in which the evaluation of opinion diversity and bias becomes relatively simple - at least simpler than it would be in the case of multi-party systems.

The following section briefly describes some peculiarities of the US electoral system, and introduces the 2012 elections' main characters.

The American system of selecting a chief federal executive and a vice-president is indirect. The president is not elected directly by popular vote, or chosen by federal or state legislatures. Instead, the election is in the hands of the Electoral College, an intermediary body of 538 electors, in which each state is represented by as many electors as many Congressional representatives it has. (This, in turn, is the function of the state's size and population.) On Election Day - the 1<sup>st</sup> Tuesday after the 1<sup>st</sup>

Monday in November, normally every 4 years -, voters nominally cast their vote on a presidential ticket, but their votes are actually awarded to parties, the winner of which will then send a slate of electors to the Electoral College. Electors are likely to vote for the candidate of the party that received the largest share of the popular vote in their states - but they are not obliged to do so (CQ Press 2010, pp.8–10).

The electoral system was designed to "balance the tensions among the various states and protect the authority of the executive from the influence of Congress and the population at large:" it was feared that "the public would not be able to make an intelligent choice and hence would simply splinter among various regional favourite-son candidates" (Kazin 2011, pp.204–205). On the flip side, however, the electoral system may lead to a situation where a candidate who has lost the popular vote acquires an electoral majority. This has so far happened four times, raising questions regarding the representativeness of the system (CQ Press 2010, p.8).

A feature of the electoral system is that in all but two states (Maine and Nebraska), *all* electors that the state sends to the Electoral College are awarded to the party who got the majority of the popular vote, instead of the electors being divided between parties in proportion of the votes they received. This "winner-take-all" arrangement favours large parties, and the electoral system as a whole does not help the case of smaller parties who do not have a nationwide organization. Consequently, the US political system on the federal level has been a de facto 2-party system (Kazin 2011, p.198). Since 1804, US presidents have been candidates of the Democratic and Republican parties (CQ Press 2010, pp.3–4).

In 2012, *Mitt Romney*, businessman and former governor of Massachusetts, emerged victorious from the Republican primaries as the party's presidential nominee, and *Paul Ryan*, a member of the House of Representatives, as its vice-presidential nominee. They were to face incumbent president *Barack Obama*, and his VP *Joe Biden*, representing the Democratic Party. Nominations were made official at the two parties respective national conventions, in late August and early September. In total, 439 individuals had formally registered their candidacy for the post of president at the Federal Election Commission, including Horace "Godzilla" Ashley (Third Telepathic Party); Santa Claus, and President Emperor Caesar (Federal Election Commission 2013). Slightly more serious third-party candidates included *Jill Stein* (Green Party) and *Gary Johnson* (Libertarian Party, after an unsuccessful bid for the Republican nomination).

With this concise rundown, I would like to emphasize two related contextual factors. First, that the



dominance of the American political system by two parties is not to be confused with the absence of third parties - even if their chief significance consists in the fact that they can steal votes from the major parties. In this environment, the rift between dominant and 3<sup>rd</sup> parties is an obvious way to lend the terms "mainstream" and "alternative" substance. Third parties are important because of their potential, however crippled, to upset the status quo of alternating major parties in power.

Second, the electoral system is an arrangement which has continuously received criticism. The principles that the Electoral College represents are indeed debatable, for which reason I think it's important to consider such voices in the debate which question the legitimacy of the decision on grounds related to the imperfection of the electoral system.

### **10.2. Method of structural analysis**

The structural analysis of Reddit is based on an interpretive, qualitative description of the site as an organization in control of a set of technologies. The goal of the analysis is to reveal what kinds of interaction Reddit makes possible, likely, unlikely, and impossible. In the description, pointers are taken from van Dijck (2013), Haythornthwaite (2009, 2011), Dutton (2008), Halavais (2009) and others.

### **10.3. Methods of representational analysis**

From the analytical perspective concerned with representation, the focus is on the **primary contents** of Reddit: the compilation of articles voted to the top by redditors. I analyse a sample of these articles using **quantitative** as well as **qualitative** measures - deciding on a case-by-case basis, depending on what kind of method would be best suited to the task of rendering a particular normative requirement practically measurable.

Unless otherwise indicated, the **unit of representational analysis** is an individual **article**. An article is a logically and structurally coherent set of pieces of information, expressed in written text, images, video and audio recordings, or any given combination of these. E.g. an online news article, or a video hosted on *YouTube*, or an audio recording hosted on *SoundCloud*.

Since articles are always hosted on the web, an extremely complex visual environment that is also open to dynamic change, in some cases it is difficult to decide what is part of an article, and what isn't. Trivially: articles are often surrounded by advertising. Articles might also contain hyperlinks which point to other articles; and websites often allow readers to add their comments to articles (or, in the case of wikis, to change the articles themselves). In order to dis-embed articles from this network of intertextuality, advertising, readers' comments, and linked websites are *not* considered to

be parts of an article. In contrast, embedded pieces of text, images, videos and audio files are considered to be part of the article.

In order to arrive at a meaningful and comprehensible interpretation of findings, the scope of my enquiry is limited to articles that discuss, at least indirectly, the 2012 presidential election. Articles that do not do so are rejected as irrelevant.

It would be possible to analyse articles without a prior screening of the sample, based on their contents (e.g. Meraz 2009). But it would be exceedingly hard to construct a common evaluative framework that could sensibly apply to all kinds of topics, and interpret them using a common baseline. It is perhaps interesting that a lot of articles on Reddit are about gardening, or programming in Python, or chemistry, but interpreting these articles using a common dictionary, interested in political opinion, would in all likelihood lead to excessive amounts of unintelligible noise. At any rate, since my sample focuses on *constitutive* sections of Reddit, the problem of relevance is not expected to be serious.

Relevant articles are ones that discuss any of the following:

- a.) A presidential or vice-presidential nominee.
- b.) The US Republican or Democratic party.
- c.) Any other US-based political party or political movement, such as the Occupy!-movement, or the organization of the Tea Party.
- d.) The election itself, or any nominee's election campaign. This includes discussions of campaign and election regulations, and the electoral system in the US.

Articles that discuss politics in general, or in connection to specific issues but without connecting these discussions to actual parties or persons involved in the election, are regarded as irrelevant.

#### **10.3.1. Content diversity**

The content diversity of relevant articles is established using two sets of quantitative measures. One of these focuses on the *persons* featured in articles that become popular on Reddit; the other provides a systematic description of the *kinds of topics* featured in them.

(a) **Who are in the news?** A list of 8 relevant persons was established, including the Democratic and Republican parties' tickets (Biden, Obama, Romney and Ryan), as well as the presidential

candidates of four minor parties (Anderson (Justice Party), Goode (Constitution Party), Johnson (Libertarian Party) and Stein (Green Party)). Each person on this list was coded as either LEADING NEWSMAKER, ALSO MENTIONED, or NOT MENTIONED in each analysed article.

This classification is based on the Pew Research Center's measure (<http://www.journalism.org>). It provides a simple, systematic description of media attention given to different candidates.

A relevant person was coded as LEADING NEWSMAKER if they were mentioned in the headline of an article, or in its leading paragraph. In case of audio and video recordings, the first 10 seconds were established as an equivalent measure. Articles may have zero, one, or several leading newsmakers.

A relevant person was coded as ALSO MENTIONED if they were mentioned elsewhere in the article. Articles may have zero, one, or several persons in this category.

A relevant person was coded as NOT MENTIONED if they were not mentioned at all in the article.

(b) **What are news about?** In order to get a sense of the primary, most important topics for articles, I relied on the assumption that these topics are featured in the beginning of articles. With this in mind, the CORE of each article was analysed. The CORE refers to the first 2 paragraphs of articles (including headlines and illustrations), or an equivalent measure (first 30 seconds) for audio and video recordings. Each sampled article was tagged - put into non-exclusive categories - on the basis of its CORE containing different kinds of statements, as detailed below.

Articles whose CORE included at least one statement about...

- campaign strategies, predictions about the election's outcome, poll data, voting patterns of various demographics, or popularity measures, were coded as HORSE RACE.
- policies (past, current, or proposed), political ideologies, or social problems, were coded as ISSUE.
- the personal qualities, attributes or circumstances of a candidate, were coded as PERSON.
- the election as a practical / theoretical process of decision making, were coded as SYSTEM.

Articles whose CORE did not include any statement of the above were coded as OTHER.

### **10.3.2. Source diversity**

A source is understood here as an entity - a person or organization - that is part of the chain of distribution of an article. Sources fall into different analytical categories (Figure 4).

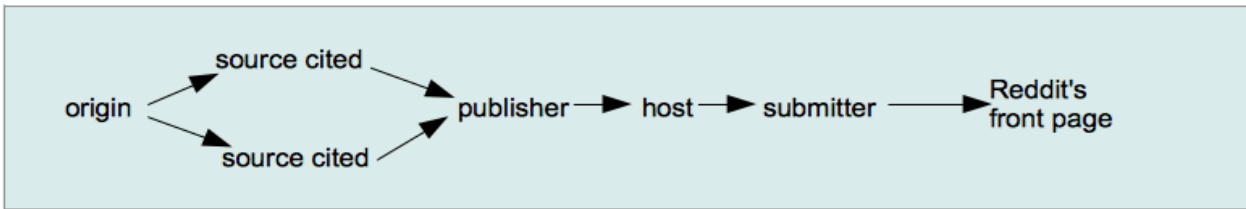


Figure 4. An article's route to Reddit

An article is a piece of content submitted to Reddit by a SUBMITTER, hosted on a web by its HOST, published by its PUBLISHER, referring to a number of SOURCES CITED, discussing a topic or event that had originally been covered by its ORIGIN.

Sources of articles were recorded for each article, producing tables like the following:

SUBMITTER	Redditor "probablyhittingonyou"
HOST	dailykos.com
PUBLISHER	Daily Kos
SOURCES CITED	The New York Times, Drudge Report
ORIGIN	CNN

Table 5. An example of different kinds of sources

The table above tells this story: *CNN* reported about some event. *CNN*'s report was used in articles that were published in the *New York Times* and on *Drudge Report*. Using these publications, the *Daily Kos* published yet another article, which is hosted on the dailykos.com domain, and which was submitted to Reddit by user "probablyhittingonyou."

The difference between HOST and PUBLISHER becomes meaningful in cases where they differ, i.e. where the PUBLISHER uses a different platform to publish an article. For instance, this would be the case of an organization publishing a video on YouTube: the content is then *hosted* on YouTube, but just because the video will be found on YouTube's servers, this doesn't mean that YouTube (and thus Google) would be responsible for its production and publication.

**Nominal** source diversity was calculated using Simpson's diversity index (Simpson's D). This index is two-dimensional (McDonald & Dimmick 2003): it accounts for the variety of items in a given sample, as well as for the evenness of distribution of different kinds of items. It is a probability-based measure, which provides relatively easy interpretation: it represents the probability that two random elements chosen from a sample are going to be of different kinds. In the specific example of source diversity, the index represents the likelihood that two randomly selected articles have the

same SUBMITTER, HOST, PUBLISHER or ORIGIN. This could be contrasted with the hypothetical situation of a person reading a single newspaper or watching an evening news programme, in which case at least the PUBLISHER of all news items are going to be the same, thus resulting in a Simpson's D of 0.

In addition to the nominal diversity of sources, their **ideological** diversity was explored, on the basis of cited sources' political leanings. This latter quality is measured on the basis of sources' self-designation, as well as scholarly consensus, if available. For instance, *Addicting Info* ([www.addictinginfo.org](http://www.addictinginfo.org)) designates itself as a progressive organ, while *Fox News* is generally regarded as representing persistent Republican slant in its coverage (Iyengar & Hahn 2009). Finally, the **internationality** of sources was explored, on the basis of the location of their headquarters of operation.

### **10.3.3. Truthfulness as reliability**

The truthfulness of articles was explored qualitatively.

Treating individual articles as units of analysis, important claims were identified, and the practical reliability of these claims was ascertained through exploring discrepancies between the objects of analysis, and other sources. In particular, I relied on *FactCheck.org*, run by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania; and the *Tampa Bay Times'* Politifact, two venerable fact-checking outlets that kept a close eye on campaign coverage in 2012.

These sources themselves are secondary, referring to still others to evaluate claims made public by politicians and pundits. Naturally, such other, context-dependent sources are also used in the analysis. Where possible, I investigated sources cited by the articles themselves, and attempted to find contradictions between the various sources involved.

This is certainly not a surefire way of establishing the truthfulness of articles - but it is a feasible one. It is also one that relies to a great extent on my own personal judgment and interpretation - which means that results at best should be treated as indicative.

### **10.3.4. Impartiality**

Impartiality was understood as balanced coverage of alternative positions. Articles were evaluated from three perspectives: (a) according to the political position they advocate, (b) according to their views on relevant persons, and (c) according to their perceived stance on political activism.

In all three perspectives, I measured the perceived attitude of an imagined agent, the article's PRODUCER. This term refers collectively to all those individuals who contributed to the publication of the article. A similar measure is used e.g. by Fahmy and Al Emad's study of *Al Jazeera's* coverage of the US-Al Qaeda conflict (2011).

(a) Articles were classified on the basis of their PRODUCER's perceived voting preference as *Democrat*, *Republican*, *third party* or *uncertain/impartial*. ("If the PRODUCER of this article could vote, who would she vote for?") This is a crude measurement, but one that parallels the peculiarities of the American political system, and one that renders the analysis of contradiction, as required by the model of deliberative democracy, straightforward.

Though simplistic, it is already an expansion of a framework used in important studies (e.g. Lazarsfeld et al. 1968 [1944], Iyengar & Hahn 2009) which does not entertain the possibility that third parties could become in any way meaningful in elections. As explained in Chapters 9.3.3. and 10.1, I consider 3<sup>rd</sup> parties important: collectively lending the term "alternative" substance. However, I also introduced a simplification into the coding procedure, in treating the opposition of the two main parties as the default setting: i.e. if third parties were not mentioned by the PRODUCER, they were treated as non-existent. In other words, if a PRODUCER vehemently agitated against the Democratic party, without mentioning an alternative, this was interpreted as Republican voting preference.

(b) PRODUCERS' views on relevant persons were used to refine the measure above. Each relevant person (10.3.1/a) was assigned a variable that could take the values of *positive*, *neutral/ambiguous* or *negative*, based on the perceived likelihood of the article's producer supporting or opposing the ideas or actions of that person. Using this measure enabled a more nuanced interpretation of articles: e.g. that the PRODUCER overall sympathized with progressive values, but disagreed with Obama's handling of particular issues.

(c) Two sets of variables were used to measure the article's perceived stance on political activism. First, four binary variables measured whether the text contains *direct and explicit calls* for different kinds of political action: *campaigning*, *voting*, *other kinds of nonviolent action*, and *violent/disruptive action*. (A call for action is "direct" if it was made by the authors of the article, as opposed to, for instance, a person interviewed.)

Second, four binary variables captured whether the text contained *practical information* that would *enable* or *facilitate* carrying out different kinds of political action (as categorized above). For example, a text informing its reader about where to register for voting was classified as containing practical information that would enable voting.

Categories of activism cited above emerged from an exploratory study of contents of Reddit.

### 10.3.5. Comprehensive temporal orientation

Reddit's immediacy/timelessness was analysed using articles' publication dates as a proxy. Reddit itself records the date when an item was submitted to the site, and in general, articles posted elsewhere on the web tend to be timestamped as well. Comparing an item's original publication date with its date of submission to Reddit served as a starting point for establishing the site's temporal orientation.

However, this is a crude measure, as it could not account for freshly published articles which themselves revisit topics previously covered. Thus, in order to refine it, I also registered the original publication date of the first cited source in articles, if such a source was available, and used that publication date as a proxy for establishing the temporal orientation of the article.

(To illustrate: one item in the sample was an article published on *AlterNet*<sup>48</sup> on August 31. This article first refers to a piece published in *Rolling Stone* two days prior. Hence, for the purpose of this measure, August 29 is used as the relevant publication date of this item.)

Next, items were categorized based on the difference between their original publication date, and the date when they were submitted to Reddit. Identical dates indicated immediacy; a few days' worth of difference indicated short-term orientation, while a difference of months or years was an obvious sign of long-term orientation.

### 10.3.6. Civility

Civility was operationally defined as the lack of incivility. Building on Papacharissi (2004) and Steenbergen et al. (2003), incivility was defined as (a) establishing exclusion by VERBALIZED THREATS, (b) AD HOMINEM ATTACKS, and (c) DISCRIMINATION.

(a) VERBALIZED THREATS are statements of an intention to inflict pain, injury, damage or other hostile action on a person or group. (An example of such a threat, gathered from Reddit: "After I forcibly insert an inanimate dildo up your ass you may reconsider your definition of the word 'rape'.") These are obvious violations of the principle of respect; of recognizing the other as a partner in conversation. The very point of democratic decision making is decision making without recourse to violence - *constitutive* media should be aware of this.

(b) AD HOMINEM ATTACKS are offensive evaluative statements addressed at individuals or groups of people (as opposed to their views or ideas), suggesting or implying that the ideas these persons or groups put forward are not worthy of consideration *because of the person(s)* that

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48 <http://www.alternet.org/election-2012/matt-taibbi-reveals-how-romney-made-his-fortune-it-aint-pretty-and-he-shouldnt-be>

introduced them. An ad hominem attack expresses or implies the idea that one's conversational partner, or addressed party, is somehow inferior, opposing the fundamental democratic idea of equality.

An example of such an attack, gathered from an article on Reddit: "Meanwhile, Paul Ryan is Romney's perfect accomplice, a hollow bigot who always seems to be ad-libbing [...]." In other words, there is no need to consider what Ryan has to say - he is an ad-libbing, hollow bigot, who is therefore not to be believed.

(c) DISCRIMINATION is any statement that makes an unjust or prejudicial distinction in the treatment of others, on the grounds of race, sex, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, religion, intellectual or physical abilities, etc. Discriminatory statements imply that members of certain other groups have inferior rights, or are in some way unequal human beings. Discrimination is a "qualified case" of ad hominem attack. An example, gathered from Reddit: "Why are Chinese so incompetent?"

An article was coded uncivil if it contained at least one instance of incivility.

#### **10.3.7. Reasoned argumentation**

Deliberative democracy requires that *constitutive* media coverage presents reasoned argumentation about positions that can be taken in the election debate. Arguments are claims that justify taking a particular political position by providing reasons for doing so. I analysed the presence of such claims in two approximations, using both quantitative and qualitative measures.

(a) First, I used the **quantitative** measure of content diversity (10.3.1) as a proxy. This was rendered possible by the fact that my concept of argument was broad and lenient (see 9.3.6), extending to any intelligible claim that provides a reason, however silly, outrageous or delusional, for taking a particular position.

With this idea in mind, I considered all those articles REASONED which had been coded PERSON, ISSUE or SYSTEM. In other words, I assumed that articles covering the elections with a focus other than that of the "game frame" were putting forward claims that could be accepted as reasons for taking a particular position in the election discussion. The claims put forward might have been trivial, silly, or otherwise of inferior quality, but at the very least, I expect such claims to invite criticism, and thus help the case of finding *good* arguments.



(b) In a second approximation, I refined the analysis by **qualitatively** exploring the different lines of argument that emerged from articles. I identified different arguments, and attempted to describe overall tendencies of Reddit's coverage by giving an account of the number and kinds of different arguments that articles provided. Since this last measure is based on my own personal interpretation of articles, I am not in a position to establish an independent measure of validity. Consequently, these findings are best treated as indicative, and complementary to other measures.

#### **10.3.8. External reflexivity**

Reflexivity is the quality of engaging critically with various positions; of critically evaluating one's own, as well as others', arguments in a debate. The degree of reflexivity of articles was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative measures.

(a) The **quantitative** measure of content diversity (10.3.1) was once again used as a proxy, with a focus on the persons represented in articles. This measure assumed that different relevant persons were invoked to represent positions of different parties. Consequently, articles that featured politicians from more different parties were considered more reflexive than those that featured politicians from fewer different parties. This is a simplistic, but workable assumption.

On the basis of content diversity, the following measures were calculated: the ratio of articles in the sample that featured LEADING NEWSMAKERS from 2 and 3 different parties; and the ratio of articles that featured, either as LEADING NEWSMAKERS *or* as ALSO MENTIONED, persons from 2 and 3 different parties.

(b) In the **qualitative** approach, lines of arguments identified (10.3.7) were classified on the basis of whether they were subject to critical review within the article analysed. Arguments that involved little or no reflection were coded as SIMPLE; arguments that were subject to considerable reflection and critique are coded as CONSIDERED. Arguments that involved some, but not very deep or thorough reflection were coded as HALF-CONSIDERED. Using these measures, the reflexivity of individual articles, as well as that of the whole sample, could be established.

Once again, these categories were based on my personal, individual interpretation and judgment, therefore I propose to treat them as indicative - perhaps to be confirmed by subsequent research, using more sophisticated tools of analysis.

#### **10.3.9. Internal reflexivity**

The reflexivity of submitters (or internal reflexivity - i.e. internal to Reddit) was measured by analysing the differences between submitted articles' original and user-given titles, and the

relationship between user-given headlines and the article itself.

This measure takes advantage of the fact that, when submitting an article, redditors have to provide a user-given title to their submission. This title may naturally be the same as the original headline; which one can just quickly copy and paste. But it does not need to be the same, and redditors can introduce all sorts of changes in meaning to the original article by outfitting it with a new title. As a first step, user-given headlines were categorised as either "SAME" or "DIFFERENT," depending on whether or not they were the same as the original headline, or only differing in insignificant ways, e.g. in a typo, or an additional word.

DIFFERENT user-given headlines were subsequently tagged, i.e. assigned to non-exclusive categories, which described the relationship between the user-given title and the article in question. Categories used were as follows.

User-given titles may have represented a SHIFT IN FOCUS, by drawing attention to an element of the article that is not highlighted by the original title.

Original headline	User-given title
In His Own Words	"I believed that if the general public, especially the American public, had access to the information contained within the [Iraq and Afghanistan war logs] it could spark a domestic debate on the role of the military and our foreign policy in general" - Bradley Manning, Whistleblower

*Table 6. An example of SHIFT IN FOCUS*

User-given titles may have offered a SUMMARY of the article, as in the following example.

Original headline	User-given title
No charge, no hearing, little recourse	VA State Police seized \$28,000 of cash donations from church secretary during routine traffic stop on the suspicion it was drug money. No charges were filed. Money was supposed to help buy new church.

*Table 7. An example of SUMMARY*

Finally, user-given titles may have contained the user's EXPRESSION OF OPINION regarding the article itself.

Original headline	User-given title
Solution to murderous muslim problem in Europe.	Holy crap, the rampant racism on the Galt's Gulch forum is astounding. O_O

*Table 8. An example of EXPRESSION OF OPINION*

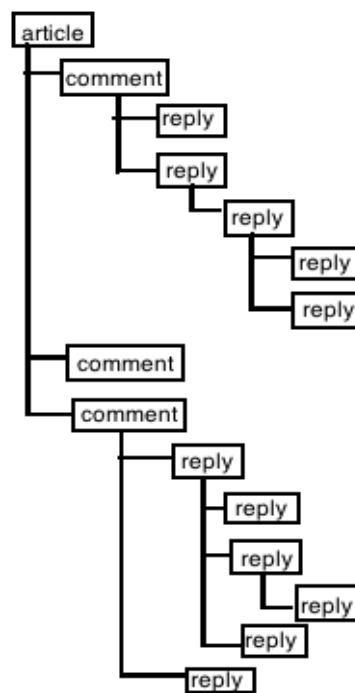
I consider differences falling into the above categories as indicators of increasing levels of reflexivity, i.e. critical engagement with the subject material. A SHIFT IN FOCUS, such as replacing the original headline with a direct quote from the article, is already enabled by a cursory look, or merely skimming the text. Offering a SUMMARY indicates that the user has actually read the whole piece; while an EXPRESSION OF OPINION is a definite indicator of at least a modicum of critical engagement.

\* \* \*

#### 10.4. Methods of interactional analysis

From the interactional analytical perspective, Reddit is a discussion board, which happens to be organized around a bunch of articles. Discussions consist of individual comment entries, which are organized in a tree-like arrangement of nested threads.

I analyse both the contents and the structure of discussion threads, using both qualitative and quantitative measures. The dual role of structure is noteworthy.



*Figure 5. Example of conversation structure on Reddit*

The structure of discussions refers to formal connections between self-contained messages that are part of the conversation.

On the one hand, these connections are naturally relevant for the analysis of contents, because it is

based on these connections that pieces of the conversation can be arranged in a logical sequence. In this sequence, the meaning of any given message may be influenced by prior messages.

On the other hand, the *structure itself* is also analytically relevant in separation from the contents. In order for any kind of comment analysis to function, the researcher must assume that the author(s) of the text followed a certain readily accessible logic when producing it. If connections between the author(s) and their texts would be arbitrary, it would be impossible to make any kind of inference from the latter to the former. In the specific case of online discussions, one element of this logic is what Gonzalez-Bailon et al. (2010, p.235) call sequential posting behaviour: "that [users'] contributions are submitted as a direct reply to the comment they refer to." Another rule that I assume participants follow is that they contribute only in case they are interested in doing so. Based on these assumptions, it becomes possible to reliably identify relevant traits of discussions by the analysis of structure alone, even without knowing what the conversation is about (ibid). Because of this, I analyse the contents and structure of discussions separately, using distinct tools; but I try to interpret results of these analyses in synthesis, as complementing parts in a whole.

Discussions on Reddit are organized into **threads**. A thread consists of any number of messages that are addressed to an article<sup>49</sup> posted on the site, or addressed to comments on that article.

Thus, messages in a thread are structurally related to the starting post (article), and it is assumed that they are logically related to it as well, meaning that there is a reason for a given message being in a certain discussion thread, and not in another one. In my analysis, the term "thread" can also refer to that part of the whole discussion that is actually subject to analysis. I.e. some threads might be simply too long to analyse, in which case only part of the discussion is considered.

**Messages** fall into either of two categories, based on their position in the thread's structure. I refer to messages that address the starting article directly as **comments**. Messages that reply not to the starting article, but to any other message in a thread, are called **replies**. In a representation of the thread as a graph, comments are nodes directly connected to the starting post. All other messages are considered replies. (See Figure 5.)

Messages in a thread are formally connected by Reddit's *reply* function, which enables users to indicate a logical connection between a comment and a reply by various visual cues. Most often, a reply is displayed directly below the comment it addresses, with a slight indentation, resulting in a staircase-like visual arrangement of comments and replies. This structure makes it easy to follow a conversation - to keep track who is replying to whom - which can be quite a challenge in a

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49 "An article" is any kind of material posted on Reddit, hosted either on the site itself, or elsewhere on the web.

conversation with hundreds of participants. (See Figure 6 below.)



Figure 6. Comments displayed on Reddit

In analysing the *structure* of discussions on Reddit, the **unit of analysis** is a discussion thread.

Structure explores the relationship between messages - naturally, this is afforded by the thread, as a set of related messages. But in analysing the *contents* of discussions on Reddit, the unit of analysis varies between the individual message and the thread. This is because the interpretation of individual messages would not be possible, or purposeful, without taking the thread as a whole into consideration, as contextual background.

#### 10.4.1. Level of participation

Participation was measured by the total number of messages in a sample of threads. This is a straightforward measure that Reddit keeps track of.

Above a certain thread length, readers might not benefit from increased participation: there's only so much that anyone can reasonably be expected to read. Still, the number of messages in a thread is a

crude but sensible starting point for the measurement of how much participative attention is stimulated by an article.

The number of messages in a sample of threads is also expressed as the fraction of the number of subscribers to the relevant section of Reddit, indicating the size of the total potential audience. Thus it becomes possible to compare the relative activism of redditors using various sections of the site. In addition to the number of messages, the number of votes on a sample of individual comment entries was also measured, allowing to compare the popularity of voting versus that of commenting. (This latter measure was inspired by a concern emerged from the structural analysis of the site.)

#### **10.4.2. Level of discursive interactivity**

Discursive interactivity is measured taking Rafaeli's (1988) definition, where interaction refers to an exchange of messages in which participants take into consideration earlier messages as well as the way in which previous messages related to even earlier ones. Thus, the barest minimum of interactivity would require three conversational turns: a starting message, a reaction to this message, and finally a reaction to a reaction. Two turns, e.g. a dialogue consisting of a single question and answer, would constitute a *reactive*, but not interactive exchange.

Since Reddit keeps track of messages and their replies, it is relatively easy to measure discursive interactivity by mapping threads like a graph, where each node is a message, and links between nodes indicate replies.

Discursive interactivity is measured by establishing the AVERAGE DEPTH of threads: the average number of steps it would take to get from the starting point of the graph (the article) to its endpoints (messages that don't receive further replies). For instance, a single comment-reply exchange has the depth of 2, whereas discursive interactivity would require a minimum depth of 3.

The AVERAGE DEPTH (D) of threads is calculated using the following formula:

$$D = ((n/e) + m) / 2$$

where  $n$  is the number of messages in a thread,  $e$  is the number of endpoints (messages that are not replied to), and  $m$  is the mean of the endpoints' distance from the starting article.  $N/e$ , i.e. the simple ratio of messages/endpoints, is likely to underestimate the average depth of conversation, while  $m$ , which considers each endpoint in separation, is likely to overestimate the average depth of conversation (see Figure 7 below). Thus, the mean of these two measures is used.

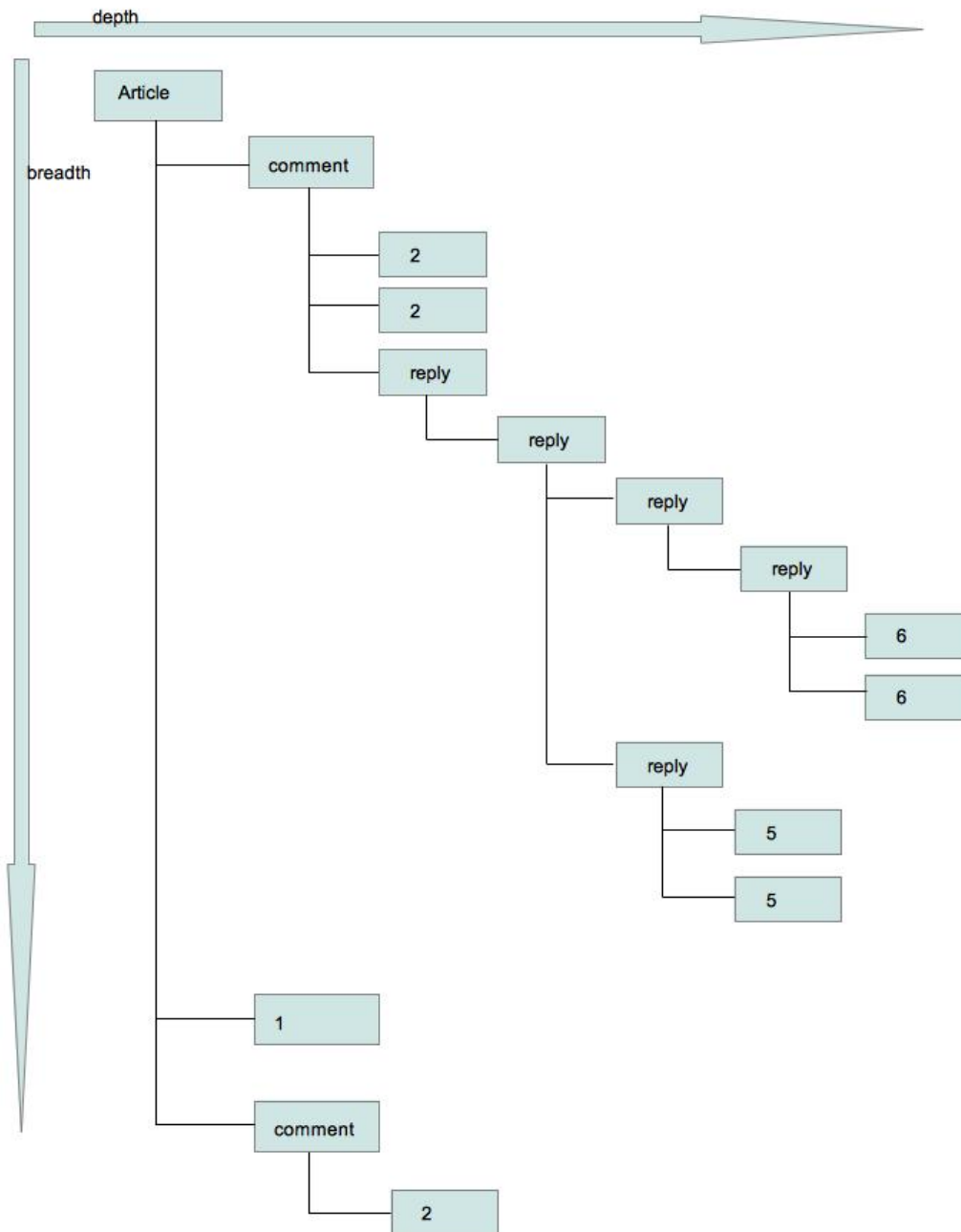


Figure 7. Breadth and depth of discussion trees. Numbers at endpoints indicate the depth of conversation (number of replies to reach that endpoint).

#### 10.4.3. Opinion presence and diversity

Redditors' expressed opinions were measured in a **quantitative** measure of content analysis, which considers the individual message (comment entry) as the unit of analysis. Opinions of conversation participants were measured in two dimensions: concerning their views regarding presidential candidates and their respective parties, and concerning their views on political activism.

(a) Each item in the sample was associated with an agent, referred to as the comment's AUTHOR. The AUTHOR's perceived voting preference was established as *Democrat*, *Republican*, *third party* or *uncertain/impartial*. As described in 10.3.4, the Republican and Democratic parties were treated as the default set, meaning that items in the sample were interpreted in this default framework, *unless* third parties were explicitly mentioned by the AUTHOR. This means that a message arguing vehemently against the Republicans, *and* not mentioning any alternative, was coded as indicative of the AUTHOR's preference towards the Democratic Party.

(b) In addition, AUTHORS' perceived stance on political activism was measured using two sets of binary variables: one establishing whether or not the message in question contains explicit calls for *campaigning*, *voting*, carrying out *other*, *nonviolent* acts of political activism, or *violent* forms of activism; and one describing whether the message contained information that would practically enable its readers to partake in these various kinds of activism. This operational measure is vindicated by the communitarian-republican model of democracy, and its insistence on creating a public sphere where peaceful political participation is supported.

#### 10.4.4. Civility

The civility of discussions was established using a quantitative measure of content analysis, which considered the individual message as the analytical unit. As detailed under 10.3.6, civility was understood as the lack of incivility, and incivility could potentially be realized by messages that contained VERBALIZED THREATs, AD HOMINEM ATTACKs, or instances of DISCRIMINATION.

#### 10.4.5. Reasoned argumentation

I originally planned to analyse the presence of reasoned arguments using both qualitative and quantitative methods. In this latter approach, I planned to analyse each sampled message in separation, and categorize them in function of the kinds of arguments - e.g. related to an issue, a person, or the system of elections - they contain. Unfortunately, the implementation of such a measure was thwarted due to unacceptably low inter-coder reliability. The fragmented, informal, often playful and self-referential nature of comments made coding them separately, from this perspective, extremely difficult. Since I thought that the only way to improve the reliability of the measure was to the detriment of its theoretical validity, I abandoned it.

Instead, I settled for a **qualitative** analysis of discussions, treating **threads**, as reasonably coherent bodies of text, **as the unit of analysis**. Within these bodies of text, I identified and counted all



different lines of reasoned arguments that emerged.

This method has drawbacks, most notably that it cannot help reflecting my personal interpretation and categorization of arguments. This questions the generalizability of findings, and suggests that they are treated as indicative. However, when complemented with other branches of analysis, I believe this provides a suitable starting point, if nothing more, to the analysis of arguments emerging from discussions on Reddit.

#### 10.4.6. Reflexivity

Reflexivity was measured using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

(a) The **qualitative** measure built on that of reasoned argumentation (10.4.5). Each line of argument was categorized as SIMPLE, HALF-CONSIDERED, or CONSIDERED (see also 10.3.8/b). A minimal condition of deliberation would expect that each line of argument would at the very least be HALF-CONSIDERED, i.e. subject at least to some critique and exploration.

As before, this measure is once again to be treated as indicative, as it reflects my personal interpretation of arguments, based on their qualitative exploration.

(b) The **quantitative** measurement built on that of opinion presence and diversity (10.4.3). After messages were coded for political opinion, the number of replies with contrary opinion that each message received was recorded. The following table sums up the meaning of "contradiction:"

Represented political opinion in message	Reply is contrary, if...
democratic	republican or third party
republican	democratic or third party
third party	republican or democrat
uncertain	-

*Table 9. The concept of contradiction in comment entries*

Finally, the number of contrary replies was divided by the total number of replies in a thread. The resulting figure indicates the extent to which the deliberative ideal is approximated - although this figure is also to be interpreted closely together with the measure of discursive interactivity (10.4.2), because the measure of reflexivity in itself does not give information about how much actual dialogic discussion is taking place. (Consider the example of a long thread of discussion with only a single reply - which happens to be contrary.) Thus, this measure records the amount of "inter-ideological talk" (Freelon 2010), and conversations that involve more such talk are assumed to be more reflexive, on the basis that such "cross-cutting exposure" (Mutz 2006) is likely to lead to disagreement, and corollary questioning of arguments put forward by conversational partners.

#### **10.4.7. Truthfulness**

The truthfulness of comments was examined from two perspectives: first, assessing whether or not comments help correct untruthful articles; and second, whether the arguments they produce are based on truthful assertions.

In both perspectives, truthfulness was explored in a qualitative manner, considering threads as units of analysis. First, the presence of assertions correcting the perceived untruthfulness of articles was ascertained. Subsequently, building on measures of reasoned argumentation (10.4.5), each line of argument was explored, using other sources to validate the claims that they invoke. As before, note that this measure also relies heavily on my personal interpretation and judgment, suggesting that findings in this specific regard be treated as tentative.

# Part IV. Results of the analysis

## Chapter 11. Analysis of the structural dimension

### 11.1. Reddit: news site *and* community - introduction to the analysis

The structural analysis combines two perspectives: one focusing on Reddit as a combination of various affordances of technology, and one focusing on Reddit as a community of communities.

From a technology-focused description, Reddit is a collaborative network organization that "employs social networking applications of the Web to facilitate group communication, thereby reshaping who contributes information to the collective group" (Dutton 2008, p.12). The goal of this organization is to create a compilation of high-quality content, both by creating collaborative standards of quality, and applying these standards to new content.

Taking part in the collaborative process on Reddit requires very little personal investment of any kind. Users can make meaningful contributions with a single mouse click, and no external factor forces them to venture beyond this "lightweight" idea of collaboration (Haythornthwaite 2009). However, they may, if they wish to do so, become more deeply involved in the process, as Reddit does provide tools to do so. Apart from casting votes of (dis)approval on submitted content, redditors can also interact with one another by conducting public discussions and exchanging private messages, realizing a more "heavyweight" process of collaboration (ibid).

The same features that enable in-depth goal-oriented collaboration also enable the pursuit of other, social goals. Thus, Reddit can also be viewed as an on-line community, whose individual members develop social relationships (Rieseberg 2011). The primary purpose of the site might be that of information exchange, but, as is often the case with web services, its users are free to appropriate it, and use it for whatever purpose they consider important<sup>50</sup>. Whatever the purposes of individual users are, from their interaction, a sense of community develops (which in turn fosters more interaction); the "culture" of Reddit, with its memes, heroes and villains, artefacts, values, notable events and narratives.

From this latter perspective, the first striking quality of Reddit is its size. It is a vast and heterogeneous collection of loosely connected parts or sections, called **subreddits**. Subreddits are

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<sup>50</sup> As Ridings and Gefen argue "people are turning the Internet into a social entity, beyond its original information purposes" (2006).

thematically organized communities, referenced in writing by an "r/" prefix - e.g. r/politics, r/mildlyinteresting, or r/chicago<sup>51</sup>. They differ wildly not only in topic, but also in tone, in size (measured by the number of their subscribed members), and in the intensity of social relationships developed by their members. "Subreddits can take any position on the scale between social networks [with a dominant social function] and social news systems [with a dominant informational function]" (Rieseberg 2011, p.19). Metareddit, an independent website kept track of around 65,000 subreddits in 2011 (Rieseberg 2011, p.2). At the time of writing, Metareddit lists more than 246,000 subreddits (Anon 2013c). Although a recent count by a Reddit administrator put the number of active subreddits at 5,487 (Goodman 2013a), where "active" means "having at least 5 posts or comments in the past day" (Goodman 2013b), this is still a large number, and the fact that **users can create new subreddits** suggests that the number of subreddits will keep on growing.

From the tech perspective, Reddit provides an underlying infrastructure for all these diverse subreddits, and it makes sure that they stay connected through the site's front page, as well as through individual users, who are free to choose the subreddits they want to subscribe to. But, given the differences between subreddits, from the social perspective, it is misleading to speak of "Reddit as such," in any context other than it being a community of communities. Reddit calls itself "the front page of the internet," but it is also a model of the internet, in the sense of a flexible technological infrastructure enabling various, diverse communities to spring to life.

With this in mind, my analysis focuses on *a particular set of subreddits*, which were dedicated to the purpose of covering US politics in general, or the 2012 presidential election campaign in particular, in a decidedly non-partisan manner. These subreddits are considered *constitutive* media outlets by virtue of their explicitly stated goals. (See Chapter 12.1.)

## **11.2. Ownership, business model and management**

### **11.2.1. Description**

Reddit was founded in 2005 by college graduates Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian. It was acquired by magazine publisher Condé Nast, Inc., owner of brands such as *The New Yorker*, *Wired*, *Vanity Fair* and *GQ*. Condé Nast is a subsidiary of Advance Publications, Inc., which, through various subsidiaries, publishes magazines, websites, as well as "newspapers in more than twenty-five American cities" (Anon 2013a), e.g. the *Post-Standard* in New York, and *The Star-Ledger* in

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<sup>51</sup> The notation is derived from subreddits' URL. For instance, r/politics can be accessed at <http://www.reddit.com/r/politics>.

New Jersey. In 2011, Reddit was removed from Condé Nast and itself became an independent subsidiary of Advance Publications. As of July 2013, Reddit, Inc. has a staff of 28 people. (Martin 2011, 2013.)

According to CEO Yishan Wong, Reddit has three main sources of revenue (2013b).

Primarily, the site features advertising, in the form of banner ads as well as sponsored posts - where the submitter of a post can make sure to be on the front page for a limited amount of time. Ads are clearly marked as such, and the front page only ever contains a single sponsored post, on the top of the page (Slowe 2010).

In addition, Reddit offers a premium membership program labelled "reddit gold." Users of this service can disable ads and sponsored links, and take advantage of a few extra features, such as highlighting unread comments in a discussion thread. Otherwise, premium users have the same rights as non-paying users, with regard to submitting posts, commenting on them, moderating them etc. Reddit gold currently costs \$2.99 a month (Schiraldi 2010).

Finally, Reddit also offers merchandise: T-shirts, posters, mugs etc. (Edberg 2013.)

So far as the popularity of the site is concerned, the business model seems to be working. According to *Forbes*, Advance Publications spent "little more than loose change [\$5 million or less] in 2006 to acquire Reddit [...]. Now Advance could be looking at a 30-to-1 jackpot on a fast-growing property that's arguably worth \$240 million or more" (Anders 2012). In 2013, 6% of American adults who use the internet were found to be Reddit users, with a key demographic being 18-29 year old urban and suburban males (Duggan & Smith 2013). According to Alexa, an analyst firm, Reddit is the 49<sup>th</sup> most visited website in the US (Anon 2012c). Using the number of visitors as the indicative metric, Reddit has so far doubled in size every 15 month since its launch (Edberg 2013); in June 2013 it was browsed by more than 70 million unique users (Goodman 2013a).

According to Kate Gardiner, a social media advertising analyst, Reddit is an influential channel of online traffic: as a rule of thumb, every upvote a submitted link receives stands for 27 clicks on the link, i.e. 27 new visitors to the page that the link points to (personal consultation, 2012).

At the same time, Reddit's CEO has recently stated that the site is, and has always been, in the red:

"We're not grossly unprofitable (i.e. we're not haemorrhaging money), but revenues are still a bit short of expenses. One reason we're not quite profitable is that *as reddit becomes more popular, it means more traffic, which means more servers needed to support the traffic*. Our traffic serving bill has risen steadily [...]. We've also

hired people, though we have been quite careful with that - if we fired half the reddit staff, we would technically be profitable, but then things would probably fall into disrepair almost immediately. [...]

Our ads also don't make quite as much money as most ads in other places do. The reason is because big, invasive flashy ads actually have the highest CPMs [cost-per-mille: the cost of reaching 1000 views], and we don't allow those. So we probably make a bit less on ads than most people expect." (Wong 2013a, emphasis added).

Such a state of things questions the long-term sustainability of the site using the current business model, but at this point it's impossible to tell if, when, and how, the model should change in the future.

For a company with considerable web presence, Reddit's staff is small, and "[s]taffers hardly touch a thing. Instead, the site [...] **turns scads of its young, mostly male, college-educated visitors into unpaid contributors** [...]" (Anders 2012, emphasis added). Contributing means posting and commenting as well as moderating these posts. Reddit only lays down a set of ground rules - "no spamming, no cheating [vote-tampering], no personal info, nothing illegal [...], no interfering with the site's functions [and] no suggestive or sexual content featuring minors" (Anon 2012a). So long as these are respected, "subreddits are a free market. Anyone can create a subreddit and decide how it is run" (Goodman 2011). Reddit's employees maintain and develop the code and overall infrastructure of the site, handle site-wide policy violations, and "keep the lights blinking" (ibid), but otherwise let the subreddits develop in whichever way they prefer. Given the size of Reddit, the variety and growth subreddits, the only way imaginable to control or police the site is to rely on the help of the contributors themselves.

This delegated management style is accompanied by a narrative of transparency. Reddit staff, including its CEO and general manager, are heavy users of the site themselves, and often publicly share information about the company in various subreddits, or on the staff blog. Another aspect of the transparency is the fact that Reddit's software code is open source, and freely available (<https://github.com/reddit>). This means that moderators can implement new features in their respective subreddits.

One feature of the site, however, is kept under wraps. The algorithms that protect the site from spammers and vote cheaters, are not revealed to the public. According to the site's administrators, companies often try to manipulate and spam Reddit in order to gain free media exposure - but they regularly fail (Schiraldi 2011), meaning that the site guarantees that whatever gets to its front page is a genuine representation of redditors' public opinion.

### 11.2.2. Implications

With regard to its ownership, Reddit, Inc. is undoubtedly part of the mainstream media establishment. Specifically, its interests are aligned with those of Advance Publications, which suggests that there is an incentive to promote Advance's publications through its content.

At the same time, **Reddit empowers its users to create markets of information that Reddit itself is not in the position to fully control**. Administrators of the site are not even in total control of the software code itself (as moderators can implement new features), and given the site's breadth, it's inconceivable that any significant external control could be exercised over the contents of any given subreddit, without involving its moderators. Within the general framework constituted by a set of basic rules and recommendations, Reddit promises to be a bastion of free speech - a representative of alternative as well as mainstream views. It "enables the individual, and gives literally anyone who has something interesting enough to say the ability to reach millions" (Tynski 2012).

The fact that most of Reddit is open source does not only mean that moderators can implement new features in their respective subreddits, but also that groups and individuals not associated with Reddit can create applications on top of the site's services and data. A notable example is the Reddit Enhancement Suite (RES, <http://redditenhancementsuite.com>), a browser expansion package that alters Reddit's default interface and offers its users features which would be cumbersome to use in vanilla Reddit. This paper cannot deal with such extensions of Reddit, or examine how they impact the site's democratizing potential - but perhaps future studies might undertake this task.

Given the site's business model, Reddit could be accused of exploitation (see Kperogi 2010). After all, it is kept afloat by the unpaid labour of redditors. What's more, contents on Reddit are either available elsewhere on the web, and/or created - voluntarily - by redditors themselves: Reddit, Inc. does not *produce* original content at all! But in this regard, I concur with P. J. Rey:

"although exploitation certainly occurs in social media and remains central to the business model of these platforms, it does not occur at [...] unprecedented levels that [some scholars] have claimed because *users are compensated for their labor in a manner other than wages*" (2012, p.402, emphasis added).

This also implies that exploitation is *not* accompanied by alienation (ibid). Redditors' contributions might go unrewarded by material compensation, but the fact that they still happen, despite a complete lack of any coercion, suggests that redditors do *feel* rewarded by their work in some

manner (Bogers & Wernersen n.d.); and, importantly, they are also in the position to *reward one another*, by providing tokens of feedback, important/interesting/entertaining information, or other, possibly "self-capital-enhancing" resources (Hargittai & Hinnant 2008).

In the particular context of elections, an obvious motivation to undertake unpaid labour might be the desire to promote a particular political position, which individual subjects might recognize as something in their best interest. Or, as Barry Wellman wrote, in reply to the suggestion that discussions on the Association of Internet Researchers' mailing list are also a form of uncompensated labor:

"There are moral rewards, social rewards, and material rewards. Me, I prefer Naches." (2013.)

I cannot explore the nuances of the argument here. My simple point is that I disagree with strongly Marxist readings of social media (e.g. Fuchs 2010).

A final thought concerns the "organic" nature of Reddit's contents. One of the crucial features of the site is maintaining that contents on the site accurately reflect redditors' opinion; that whatever gets to the front page is genuinely considered worthy of attention by the majority of Reddit users. The loss of this sense of authenticity would not only render claims of democracy hollow, it would also jeopardize the site itself (Schiraldi 2011, see also Castells 2007). According to digital strategist Kate Gardiner, Reddit *is* in fact authentic in this sense, in spite of advertisers' continuous attempts to game the site and rig its voting mechanism (personal consultation, 2012). This doesn't mean that every single piece of content on the front page has been submitted by enthusiastic redditors without a hidden agenda, but it does mean that getting something visible on the site *without the community's approval* is next to impossible.

\* \* \*

### **11.3. Accessibility**

#### **11.3.1. Description**

Contents of Reddit are publicly available without registration. In general, anyone can read the site. In fact, around half of the traffic Reddit receives is generated by lurkers (Edberg 2013): unregistered users who do not contribute to its contents in any way. Because of their non-involvement, this thesis cannot say anything definitive about lurkers - who they are, and why they choose to stay away, could be subject to subsequent research.

Voting, commenting and submitting content demands registration, which is simple, free, and



requires only a working e-mail address. Registration involves choosing a user name. Reddit uses these pseudonyms tied to user profiles, which themselves are publicly accessible accounts of users' history on the site: what they submitted and commented on.

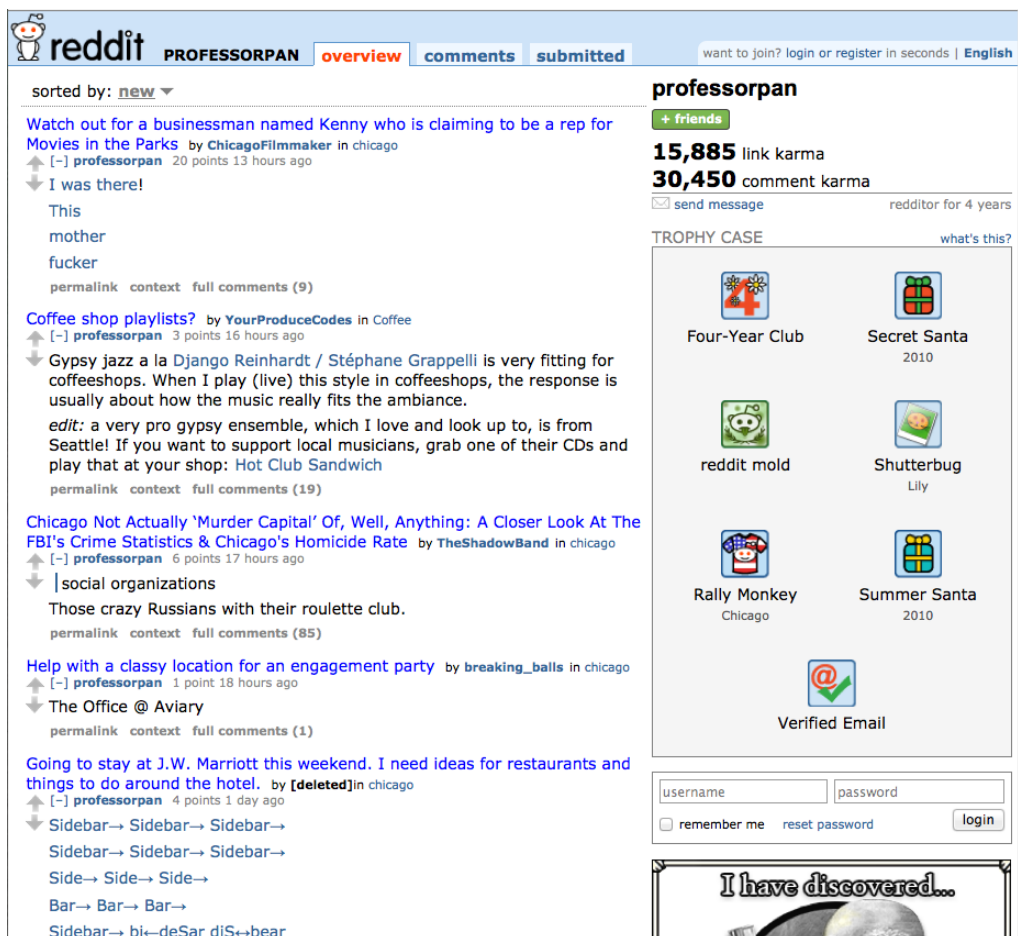


Figure 8. A Reddit user profile page

Profiles do not contain personal information - in fact, posting personal information, by which users can easily be identified offline, is squarely against the site's terms of use. Conversely, profiles do contain a "trophy case:" a collection of various badges that Reddit awards to prolific users. User profiles are not immediately visible when browsing items or comments; they are contained on a separate webpage, identified by the user's name (e.g. reddit.com/user/MrTulip).

The ease of registration enables users to create multiple accounts - for instance, to achieve an increased degree of anonymity. The expression "*throwaway account*" refers to the practice of creating a new profile in order to post something that the user would not like to associate with their existing one. And users are also known to introduce an element of play into how they use the site by creating what are known as "*novelty accounts*:" user profiles with assumed identities that are often meant to be funny or whimsical, such as users "rambles\_offtopic" (who does ramble off topic),

"POLITE\_ALL\_CAPS\_GUY" (who juxtaposes the online representation of SHOUTING with being extremely polite), or "Sure\_Ill\_Draw\_That" (who turns up in random subreddits, posting drawings that illustrate whatever the discussion is about).

The site's interface is available in several languages, including Arabic, Japanese, Russian, and Chinese, and subreddits themselves naturally contain content in whatever language members of that subreddit prefer.

Although general access to the site is regulated by its admins, moderators can introduce various barriers to access: they can render their subreddits *private* (whereby only approved members of the subreddit can view its contents or post there), or *restricted* (whereby the subreddit is publicly available for anyone to see and post comments on submitted items, but only approved members are allowed to submit links).

#### **11.3.2. Implications**

Reddit provides universal access to its services, as well as a policy of anonymity that tries to consciously hide users' offline identities. This means that users can escape potential negative (offline) consequences of using the site. This, in turn, potentially widens the scope of Reddit's contents - for better (increased diversity of points of view) and worse (increased chances of illegal or uncivil content).

At the same time, the site does keep track of users online identities, and users have little control over the publicness of these identities. But it takes very little skill to create multiple accounts, and thereby to experiment or play with multiple identities.

This also raises a potential problem regarding the authenticity of contributions. Redditors may create multiple accounts to be able to cast multiple votes, or use alternative accounts as "sock puppets," entering into a mock disagreement with oneself in order to create the illusion of having a strong, convincing argument.

Reddit explicitly forbids cheating, and claims to have a system whereby voting manipulation can be discovered and countered, e.g. by checking if multiple votes are cast on any single item from the same IP-address (Schiraldi 2011). But it is difficult to objectively evaluate the effectiveness of such anti-cheating regimes.

Redditors themselves often rely on users' "Reddit age" (time passed since registration) as a clue to help elaborate the genuineness of their contributions. Recently created accounts with brief histories

are more suspicious than accounts that had been registered a long time ago, and have a demonstrable, long history of engagement with the site. Consider the following example - a reconstruction of a slice of a discussion thread<sup>52</sup>. The discussion revolves around a young girl who, according to a hidden camera video clip uploaded to YouTube, might have committed voter registration fraud. User names are emphasized by **bold** type.

[...]

**lqwertyd**: Actually, she's a Morm-mon -- behold the CTR ring on her right hand.

**MapMapMapMap**: Here's comparison of her hand with a CTR ring. [link to enhanced image]

**Ominous\_Brew**: Do you work for CSI?

**CSI\_Tech\_Dept**: No, he does not.

**Xephyrous**: redditor for 2 years, 10 months and 15 days, it checks out.

[...]

In this example, the comment of user **CSI\_Tech\_Dept** is suspicious, because it is unlikely that a user with that particular name would just happen to show up in the middle of a thread, as if on cue. User **Xephyrous** presumably followed the same line of thinking, and checked **CSI\_Tech\_Dept**'s profile, to see if it was a novelty account - one created for comedic effect in this particular situation. But, as it turns out, the profile was created years ago, suggesting that what we witnessed here is indeed a rare coincidence.

Thus, Reddit age can be a useful clue; but it certainly doesn't eliminate all the uncertainty resulting from the pseudo-anonymity of Redditors.

In this setting, the "goodness of fit" between those participating in political discussion, and the political institutions they address, is also questionable - especially when discussion is conducted in widely spoken languages such as English. According to Alexa, roughly 50% of Reddit's users access the site from the US (Anon 2012c); so it is fair to assume that non-Americans are also taking part in discussions about US politics.

\* \* \*

## **11.4. Meaningful functional interactivity**

### **11.4.1. Description**

Redditors submit links to content hosted elsewhere on the web, or create entries of written text on the site itself. These latter entries are also called "self posts." On the whole, these two kinds of

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<sup>52</sup> [http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/10ci9h/el\\_paso\\_county\\_colorado\\_employee\\_acting\\_for\\_the/c6chwyv](http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/10ci9h/el_paso_county_colorado_employee_acting_for_the/c6chwyv)

comments are represented in Reddit with an equal share (Edberg 2013), but the ratio varies among subreddits: e.g. r/politicaldiscussion is dedicated entirely to self posts.

Submitted items are organized and displayed in a subreddit-specific "new queue" - essentially, a list of the latest submissions. Redditors then **vote** on submitted items. A vote can express approval (upvote or "upboat") or disapproval (downvote). Each redditor can vote on each article only once, but votes can be revoked and changed. Voting is not compulsory.

Redditors can also comment on every submitted item. Comments are organized in a threaded structure, and displayed on a separate comment page for each submitted item.

An algorithm measures the popularity of submitted items based on the number of up- and downvotes they receive. Items that are more popular become more visible: they are moved higher up on the list that shows current contents of a subreddit, and eventually, if popular enough, to the general front page of Reddit. Comments can also be voted on, and their visibility is also affected by their popularity, as measured by votes<sup>53</sup>.

The "score" of an item or comment is the difference between the number of up- and downvotes it received. By default, Reddit displays the score of each submitted article and item, but not the number of up- and downvotes. It is possible to have these displayed too, using e.g. the Reddit Enhancement Suite (RES); however, these latter two numbers always appear "fuzzed:" it is always possible to tell the difference between up- and downvotes, but never the *actual* number of up- and downvotes a post received. According to Reddit's administrators, this is done so as to hinder the use of spambots that could take advantage of more accurate measures of feedback (Anon 2013b): due to the fuzzed numbers, it is impossible to ascertain whether or not spamming is effective. Consider Figure 9 below.

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53 For an in-depth exploration of the mathematical model behind article ratings on Reddit, see Salihefendic (2010) and Springer (2013).



Figure 9. A comparison of browsing Reddit with (bottom) and without (top) Reddit Enhancement Suite. Note that RES shows the number of up- and downvotes (51 and 20) - but those numbers are fuzzed, uncertain. Users can vote on the article by clicking the arrows above and below the score indicator (showing 31 in this example).

Voting on articles has another function, apart from separating high- and low-quality content. It provides **feedback** between redditors. The submitter of an item earns so-called **karma** points with each vote gained, positive or negative. These points have no productive or economic function, but they act as redditors' social approval ratings, or a reflection of "how much good the user has done for the reddit community" (ibid, see also Poor 2005, Ganley & Lampe 2006). Redditors' karma points are publicly visible, and they come in two varieties. "Link karma" refers to the points users gained for submitting items, and "comment karma" shows the points they accumulated by comments.

Regardless of accumulated karma, users have the same rights, and access to the same features of the site. However, each subreddit has moderators, too. A moderator is a user with special rights in a given subreddit. Mods can remove posts they deem to be in violation of the subreddit's fundamental rules (post-hoc moderation; cf. pre-moderation: Wright & Street 2007, p.857), and ban offenders. At the creation of a new subreddit, its creator becomes its moderator. Existing moderators themselves can appoint new moderators, and revoke moderating rights from others. Mods are not employed by Reddit; they work on a voluntary basis (Anon 2013b).

Redditors can also establish formal "friendships" on the site, although the term here is misleading.

"Friendship" on Reddit refers to a potentially asymmetric relationship between two redditors, where one is notified of the actions of another - so it becomes easier for one to see what her "friend" is commenting on or submitting. The term "follower" would be more fitting - especially given the fact that the person being befriended doesn't get notified of the fact in any way.

A final, but crucially important point about interacting with Reddit is the fact that redditors can **personalize** the contents of the site in a number of ways. Notably, they can subscribe to any number of different subreddits. Thus, every user's front page will include submissions only from those subreddits that the user has subscribed to. Redditors can navigate between their chosen subreddits by clicking the bookmarks (or "shortcuts") on the top of the screen, or via a drop-down menu which is a key part of the minimalist interface the site has (Figure 10).

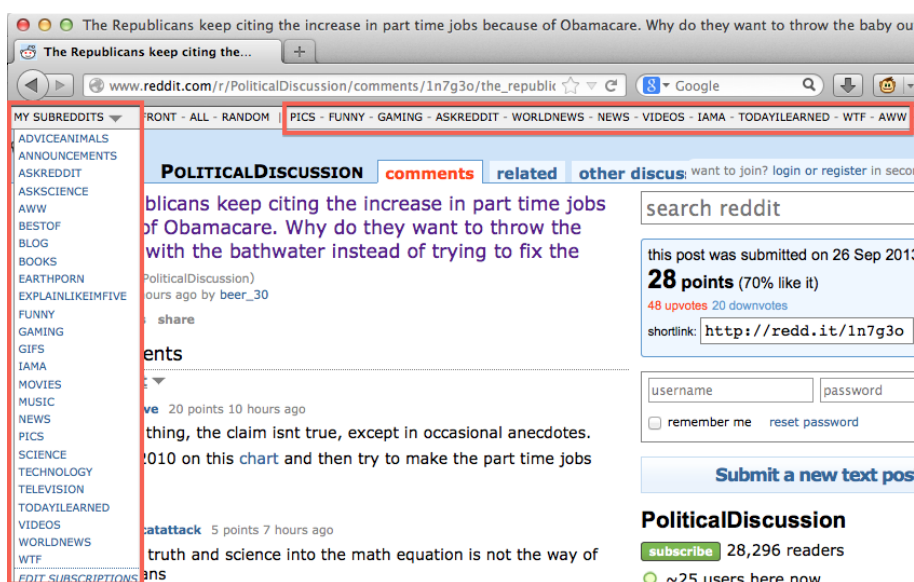


Figure 10. Drop-down menu and bookmarks to navigate between subreddits

As mentioned above, redditors are also free to *create* new subreddits. In case they do, they become moderators of their created subreddits, and can experiment with it, down to the level of changing the code that is responsible for visualizing the contents of the site.

A shallower version of such tinkering is available for non-moderator users too, who can choose to visually organize the contents of Reddit in various ways. By default, the site shows "hot" items: articles that have recently been receiving a large number of upvotes. Users can also view articles in the new queue (items being submitted *right now*), check which articles are "rising" (quickly collecting upvotes, with an imminent chance of becoming "hot"), see articles that are most

controversial (as measured by the number of up- and downvotes), or browse articles that have proven most popular in the past hour, day, week, month, year, or all time.

Similarly, comment entries attached to articles can be organized in different ways: in chronological order, in function of their past ("top") or current ("hot") popularity, the amount of controversy they sparked, or in the default setting, labelled simply "best," which tries to make sure that popular comments are more visible, and, at the same time, that supposedly clever one-liners, jokes, or otherwise irrelevant but funny comments don't steal the show (Munroe 2009).

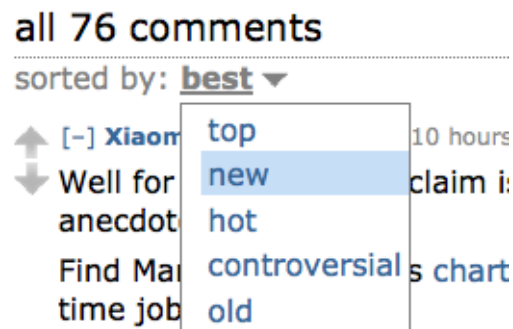


Figure 11. Interface of diverse comment sorting options

#### 11.4.2. Implications

(a) **All votes are not equal.** Reddit provides a framework that in theory enables not only the filtering of previously published online contents, but also the creation of self-organizing communities. In principle, the site is the epitome of egalitarianism: each user has the same rights, and each submitted piece of content is judged by the same standards. But technological and social factors may cast a shadow on Reddit's information democratizing potential. Perhaps the most important of these is that all votes are not equal. This inequality is threefold.

First, trivially, assuming that larger subreddits attract a larger number of submissions, the weight of any vote depends on the size of a subreddit. In smaller subreddits, with a lower number of users, it is easier to get noticed, to get feedback, and thus to make an item more visible.

Second, given the mathematical model of Reddit's algorithm (Salihenfendic 2010), which has to handle a constant influx of new content, early votes are more important than later votes. In the case of large subreddits, the first ten votes are equal in effect to the subsequent 100 votes. In general, if a submitted item doesn't receive upvotes relatively early, it will be quickly replaced by something else in the new queue, slashing its chances of making it to the front page. Although late votes also contribute, and they also provide feedback between users, *it is essentially the early votes that*

*decide how visible a piece of content is going to be.*

And third: previous votes exert social influence on others (Lorenz et al. 2011). Muchnik et al. (2013) demonstrated that "positive social influence" [expressed by "likes" or upvotes] can increase the likelihood of subsequent positive ratings by 25 - 32%, especially when large crowds of users contributed to the aggregation. In other words, although users are supposed to make up their minds independently, they do rely on cues from other users, when they pass judgement on submitted contents. The approval rating of a given item is an obvious cue of that ilk: the higher the score, the more other users have considered an item worthy of attention. This further enhances the weight of earlier votes.

Redditors themselves refer to this as the "**hivemind**" effect, while Muchnik et al. prefer the term "**herding**" behaviour, and point out that it is especially apparent in the case of positive feedback - i.e. users are *more* affected by signs of approval by others than by signs of disapproval (ibid). This might be a silver lining, as it entertains the possibility that voting something into oblivion by a quick flurry of downvotes might not be that easy.

What is a problem of design is compounded by the fact that going through the new queue of submissions can be an uncomfortable, unsavoury task, precisely because the content found there is hit and miss - not yet judged by the community. Since voting is not compulsory, Olson's theorem (1971) applies: in large groups, in which individual contributions are less noticeable, rational individuals will free ride on the efforts of others. This is so even if there's a general agreement that everyone would be better off if nobody opted out.

Free riding, in the case of Reddit, means enjoying the content compiled by others, but not taking an active part in the editorial process itself. According to Gilbert (2013), this is precisely what the majority of redditors, in larger subreddits, are doing. Differences between items' scores and subreddit size are often several orders of magnitude, which also suggests that *most users don't actively get involved* in the supposedly collaborative filtering process.

The same considerations apply with regard to comments. Commenting early means being more influential, simply by the fact that earlier posted comments are visible for a longer time than ones posted later. In addition, users are known to judge comments by the number of up- and downvotes they already received, which again suggests that early votes have a disproportionately large effect. In order to dampen this effect, moderators are able to hide the number of up- and downvotes a comment receives for a set period of time after it has been posted:



"The goal of this feature is to try to reduce the initial bandwagon/snowball voting, where if a comment gets a few initial downvotes it often continues going negative, or vice versa. By hiding the score for a while after posting, the bias of seeing how other people voted on the comment should be greatly reduced." (Birch 2013)

Unfortunately this feature was implemented in April 2013, thus it didn't affect comments in my sample, gathered in the autumn of 2012.

Timing is relevant not only in the relative, but in the absolute sense as well. Choosing to submit an item to a social news site at any given time of the day means limiting potential audiences to those who are likely to be awake, online, and not at work at that given moment<sup>54</sup>. This is a crucial factor in the popularity of submitted items (Doerr et al. 2012). Those users who are aware of such strategic factors, or simply lucky, have a better chance at influencing what gets to the front page.

None of the above suggests that Reddit would be undemocratic. But it's important to recognize that the equality it promotes between users is a theoretical **equality of opportunities**, which nevertheless has a chance of leading to *practical* or **enacted inequality**.

**(b) Risks of feedback.** Reddit filters content based on the aggregation of individual users' judgments. From an external, normative perspective, this practice also carries risks.

Reddit's democratic potential lies in its openness, the fact that it is theoretically capable of finding alternative perspectives, of giving voice to those excluded from the mainstream, and thus to act as the "watchdog of watchdogs." But the very system that enables the site to separate high quality from low quality content can also be a strategic impediment on its openness. Writing about *Digg*, a site whose original incarnation shared many of Reddit's features, including the up- and downvote system and users' karma, Alex Halavais notes that

"[i]t might be assumed that when systems of ranking and filtering are established in a community [...] this results in changes in the behaviour of its members. [...] The filtering system that makes Digg so successful as a destination also enforces a process that trains users to behave in ways that conform to community standards and expectations." (2009, p.457.)

According to Chen et al. (2011), this is more than assumptions: members of collaborative, online communities do indeed change their behaviour depending on the feedback they receive. Feedback on Reddit is ample and instantaneous, in the form of scores on each instance of contribution. Thus it

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<sup>54</sup> Redditors themselves are known to reflect ironically on this fact. E.g. "Quick, America is asleep! Post pictures of countries that aren't going to war with Syria!" (<http://www.reddit.com/tb/1le72p>)

is reasonable to hypothesize that, although community standards in principle have a chance to change, they instead tend to ossify, as newer users, in a period of socialization, learn how to behave, and internalize the values of their chosen subreddits - or leave.

This in itself might not be surprising, nor especially threatening for democracy. The problem is that there is no guarantee that community standards will value openness and diversity. On the contrary: since disagreement is uncomfortable and unpleasant for the majority of people, it is not likely that large and voluntary communities could crystallize around it (see Chapter 9.2.4). In other words, there is a threat that politically interested subreddits become de facto strongholds of partisan opinion, in spite of Reddit's nominal openness and emphasis on egalitarian, democratic contribution. Reddit might be "content agnostic" - but the people that use them might not be. Interestingly, Reddit itself is aware of this threat. "Reddiquette" emphasises that up- and downvotes should be cast on the basis of reasons, as opposed to emotional reactions or mere disagreement:

"[Don't] downvote an otherwise acceptable post because you don't personally like it. Think before you downvote and take a moment to ensure you're downvoting someone because they are not contributing to the community dialogue or discussion. If you simply take a moment to stop, think and examine your reasons for downvoting, rather than doing so out of an emotional reaction, you will ensure that your downvotes are given for good reasons." (Anon 2013d.)

But whether redditors heed this advice, or they create a feedback-loop of like-minded users where the rational thing to do would be never to disagree with the prevailing opinion, is an open question.

**(c) Changing quality standards and subreddit migration.** Halavais' and Chen's theory described above does not explain the phenomenon of old, founding members of communities packing up and migrating to new places. Examples abound: in subreddits about Reddit (meta-reddits, such as r/theoryofreddit), it is common to meet users complaining about the declining standards of subreddits (e.g. duffmanhb 2013). There are also numerous subreddits created by users frustrated by the perceived drop in the quality of existing ones. For instance, r/coding (about 34K users) set out to be a better version of r/programming (about 450K users), r/games (about 300K users) was created by redditors fed up with r/gaming (about 3 million users); and r/truereddit (about 230K users) seeks to reform Reddit itself by being "a subreddit for really great, insightful articles, reddiquette, reading before voting, and the hope to generate intelligent discussion."

Such cases demonstrate that community standards, which users at once invoke and define when they cast their votes, can change. They can change, even in spite of existing members' resistance,

expressed as negative feedback toward newcomers; and the change can drive existing members away. In these acts of migration, Reddit seems to be caught in a perpetual EPS (elite - popular - specialized) cycle of development (Tewksbury & Rittenberg 2012, pp.64–65). New subreddits gradually grow in popularity until reaching mass appeal; when the perceived change in quality standards leads some users to found new, better versions of the old subreddit.

However, the crucial factor seems to be not size itself, but the *rate of growth*. It is reasonable to expect that communities might not be in the position to preserve their existing standards of quality in case a large number of new members, outweighing active older ones, join in a relatively short period of time.

Focusing on the rate of expansion (and not size itself), it is also possible to reconcile studies that show discourse quality to be a direct function of group size (Aschoff et al. 2011, Hew & Cheung 2010), with the migration of frustrated old members, as observable on Reddit. Growth is good, because it means the pool of contributors and resources is expanding - but if it happens quickly, it will necessitate that existing members, not new ones, adapt. In the case of Reddit, growth seems to be happening very quickly indeed (see Chapter 11.2.1.).

Although redditors like to complain about "the good old days," when everything was better, change doesn't necessarily mean a decrease in quality, when measured from an external point of view. However, there is indeed reason to believe that quality standards tend to move from stricter to looser ones. The reasoning is as follows.

Nothing can become *and stay* popular on Reddit, for any substantial amount of time, without the approval of a sizeable majority of the community. This is true even if only a minority of users makes an effort to filter the new queue of submitted items. "Knights of the New," using their disproportionate influence, may be able to get an otherwise unpopular piece to the front page, but once it becomes visible there, it will attract votes of more casual users too, who will vote the item down, away from its front page spot.

But if a community grows at a rate where new members are not adapting to its existing norms, the number and diversity of individual standards of quality, whose aggregated totality is the final arbiter of content, is also expected to grow. Consequently, it will become harder and harder to produce content that appeals to everyone. Bluntly, **the lowest common denominator is expected to drop**. Granted, in the case of Reddit, growing communities also mean a growing pool of submitted articles, and perhaps a higher chance of good content. But I hypothesize that after the size of the community surpasses a certain point, this effect is unlikely to compensate for the gradual erosion of

sophisticated standards, presuming that these standards were in place to begin with. A smaller fraction of new users are expected to contribute actively by submitting new articles, and a larger fraction of new users are expected to vote. Voting is easy- submitting is comparatively demanding.

**(d) Voting trumps commenting?** Voting is a way to actively engage not only with articles posted to Reddit, but also with other users' comments to the articles. It isn't a very articulate expression of opinion, but neither is it so demanding as writing even the simplest of comments.

Additionally, users might consider voting as a practice with more severe consequences than commenting. Votes actively influence the visibility of comments, and at the same time provide measurable feedback to the author - none of which can be said about comments. Should you find yourself in disagreement with a position put forward in a comment, it is much **more efficient to downvote it, than to try to convince its author of being wrong**. Or in case you agree with a comment well put, the way to make sure that others will consider it is to upvote it - so it becomes more visible -, rather than replying with an "I think the same, too."

Thirdly, choosing to comment also means opening up to criticism - which might be an especially important reason for holders of unpopular opinions not to do so, as evidenced by the spiral of silence phenomenon (Noelle-Neumann 1974). Those who consider their own views to be in the minority might find it especially easier to use up- or downvotes to express their views. Commenting potentially leads to confrontation - and even if it does not, it involves taking the responsibility of making a statement that can be undeniably traced back to one's user profile. Voting, from this perspective, is **safe**: since it's impossible to tell where votes are coming from, one will never have to explain why she voted this way or that.

All of these qualities suggest that voting on others' contributions is likely to be the preferred way of interaction among redditors. This, in turn, might jeopardize the prospect of meaningful, substantial discussion developing on site between participants. This is a threat in particular for communitarian-republican democracy, which expects open and inclusive communities to develop in and through communication. But vote-based filtering might actually be beneficial for deliberation.

**(e) Between oratory and conversational deliberation.** The way discussions are organized on Reddit promises an ideal setting for deliberation among redditors. The fact that users are able *both* to comment, *and* to express their opinion on other comments by voting on them, suggests that Reddit is capable of implementing a mixture of *oratory* (rhetorical) and *conversational* deliberation (Bobbio 2010). Unlike in true conversational deliberation - the kind that e.g. Fishkin's (1991) real-life experiments implemented -, not every participant needs to contribute to the discussion. Instead,

members of the audience may choose to sit on the sidelines, and take part in the debate only by voting on posts put forward by a small, active minority - the "orators" that play out the conflict for others. However, unlike in the ideal model rhetorical deliberation, participants of the debate are crowdsourced to prominence<sup>55</sup>, not on the basis of their real-life status or expertise (these are unknown factors in Reddit's pseudo-anonymity), but on the basis of the arguments they put forward. Who becomes influential in the debate is unknown at the outset, and decided *in the course of the debate itself* - which is an essentially deliberative feature.

But it also represents a risk: such deliberation can only function well if less active, vote-only members of the audience use appropriate standards to judge one another's contributions. Whether or not this is the case shall be evaluated through empirical analysis.

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### 11.5. Potential source diversity

As elsewhere in this dissertation, "source" here refers to a given media outlet: a person or institution responsible for making a piece of information public online.

#### 11.5.1. Description

By design, Reddit does not impose any limitation on admissible sources. Redditors are free to submit links pointing to any kind of content, anywhere on the web. And it is important to note that it **is in sources' interest to get submitted to Reddit and promoted to its front page**. Just like other news aggregators, Reddit doesn't "steal" content from its sources, it merely provides hyperlinks to them, acting as a potential new source of visitors rather than a rival. As Carlson (2007) points out, aggregators may not benefit all kinds of news producers equally: e.g. a small newspaper financed by locally targeted ads might find it troublesome to exchange increased popularity from a nation- or worldwide audience into increased revenues; but *other things being equal*, online news sources are better off with more visitors than with fewer ones.

Submitted content can subsequently be removed by moderators or Reddit's admins, but it is not pre-filtered. In addition, there are three ways in which Reddit promotes the equality of sources.

The first of these is related to the "clunky" user interface that "had barely been upgraded since 2005" (Anders 2012). Every submitted item is presented, visually, in essentially the same manner. When browsing Reddit, articles are represented by their title written in blue text, a small thumbnail

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<sup>55</sup> I am indebted to Zizi Papacharissi for this phrase.

image, and some additional pieces of metadata (time of submission, name of submitter, score). The source of each article is listed at the end of each title, set in smaller grey type.



Figure 12. Source indication

This results in an arguably ugly look: visually, Reddit is little more than a bunch of lists of texts. But this look also serves to disable the presentational authority (Carlson 2007, p.1016) of particular sources. Articles from a glossy magazine are represented by the same blue line of text as items from a broadsheet newspaper, or from a nameless blogger in a remote corner of the world. In this sense, Reddit is levelling the playing field: providing near equal chance for various sources to compete, visually, for attention.

The second important feature of Reddit, from the perspective of source diversity, is the simple fact that it is powered by humans. This means that the list of potential sources - sources that can be at least considered as potential outlets of high quality content - is theoretically unlimited. This is a marked difference between Reddit and algorithmic news aggregators, such as Google News. Google News finds quality content by considering a theoretical list of sources, and establishing which of these sources are proving the most popular at any given time (Anon 2011a). Consequently, it is bound to overlook sources which are not contained in its initial list. Algorithmic aggregators look set to favour the mainstream (Redden & Witschge 2010) - and one plausible reason for this is the fact that they cannot discover new sources the way human-powered aggregators can.

And third, it is important to emphasize that Reddit offers no tools to pre-filter its contents on the basis of sources. Users are free to pick and mix their subreddits (topic-related filtering), but with regard to the actual content they are exposed to in each subreddit, they are at the mercy of other redditors. Again, the contrast with algorithmic news aggregators is sharp: Google News expects its users to set preferences with regard to specific sources ("Would you like to include Fox News in your news diet?"), but this is not a possibility in Reddit. Once again, this suggests that no particular source is discriminated against - at least not from the outset<sup>56</sup>.

<sup>56</sup> Naturally, it is likely that particular sources are preferred in particular subreddits. But Reddit doesn't exclude any particular source from becoming at least potentially visible on the site. Reddit itself is willing to listen to everyone - even if its users might not be.

### 11.5.2. Implications

Based on the above considerations, it is expected that Reddit realizes a great diversity of sources. However, we should not confuse nominal and substantial diversity. A nominally or formally diverse set of sources might also be ideologically homogeneous; and Reddit has no structural features that would guarantee its ideological heterogeneity.

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## 11.6. Audience fragmentation

### 11.6.1. Description

Redditors can personalize their content by choosing which subreddits they subscribe to, and, as mentioned before, they are free to create their own subreddits too. Each user's own version of Reddit's front page is only going to contain material submitted to the subreddits that the user subscribed to. There is no theoretical limit to the number of subreddits one can subscribe to.

New users start out with a set of 22 *default subreddits*, covering a broad spectrum of topics, from US politics and world news, through technology, science, and popular culture, to video games and cute cat pictures (Angel 2013). These can be unsubscribed from. So far as Reddit is concerned, there are recommendations, but no obligatory diet of information. Still, the default subreddits are seen as important points of orientation - at least for new users, who might not be familiar with the intricacies of the site. A subsequent study could explore the hypothesis that the default subreddits - by virtue of being included in every new user's news diet - are of key importance in the socialization of new users.

There are a number of ways in which Reddit encourages the serendipitous discovery of new content - which could serve as a means to curb the fragmentation of the site's audience.

For one thing, the site comes equipped with a "random" function: visiting r/random takes users to a randomly selected active subreddit. For another, a number of meta-subreddits exist, which re-filter the filtered output of the site, looking for interesting, popular, or controversial subreddits. R/tldr<sup>57</sup> is one such meta-subreddit, offering a daily digest of content from the site.

Finally, Reddit also features a search function, whereby users can search for keywords across subreddits.

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57 "TL;DR" stands for "Too Long; Didn't Read."

### 11.6.2. Implications

Structurally, Reddit is perfectly suited for audience fragmentation.

Smaller subreddits are convenient both for moderators and for regular users. Moderators have an easier job managing smaller communities. Users can take advantage of the fact that it's easier to get recognized in smaller subreddits, which are also easier to tailor to one's specific interests and opinions. In addition, smaller communities are also better suited to the development and nurture of stronger social relationships.

Finally, as described in Chapter 11.4.2/c, redditors are known to migrate to newer and newer subreddits, as existing communities change, and with them their standards of quality.

All this, coupled with the fact that users are free to create new subreddits, indicates that an ever growing fragmentation of Reddit's audience into niche communities that never actually interact with each other, is a likely scenario. To clarify: Reddit *has always been* a community of niche communities - but these are likely to fragment into ever smaller niches themselves in the future.

\* \* \*

### 11.7. Summary and evaluation: a mixed picture

Structurally, Reddit enables democratic as well as undemocratic ways of organizing public information.

On the one hand, it is an open platform, nominally tied to the business interests of a mainstream media actor (Advance Publications), but so large and diverse as to be theoretically able to bracket those interests, and create instead a free and largely independent information market that is run according to the genuine interests of its users. It is also a platform whose structural features accommodate an exceeding diversity of sources; and one that is broadly accessible for users.

On the other hand, its structural features at best establish an equality of opportunity, but not of enacted practices. Users may be equal, but their votes are not. The central mechanism of Reddit - filtering and aggregation based on users' feedback - is likely to encourage the creation of homogenous, like-minded communities, meaning that the theoretical openness and diversity of the site is never actually reached in practice. In addition, Reddit's growth rate threatens to lead to a decline of existing quality standards, at least in larger subreddits. Finally, a number of factors - such as the ability to create new subreddits and to freely personalize Reddit's contents - point to trend of continuous fragmentation of Reddit's growing audience.



Thus, structurally, Reddit approaches most the ideal of liberal individualism. It treats redditors as **autonomous, self-interested individuals**, who, when given a basic set of tools, are capable of the substantial realization of the principle of freedom of expression in practice. This view acknowledges that the equality of redditors is an equality of opportunity - which will inevitably lead to actual, practical inequalities. This, in itself, should not be considered as a problem. The *actual performance* of the site might fall short of the liberal-individualist ideal, in that it might fail to meaningfully put into practice the principle of free expression; but the structure of site certainly entertains the possibility of success too.

So far as the communitarian vision of democracy is concerned, Reddit's most noteworthy feature is that it is *both* a collaborative network organization - and a community of communities. The site's structural features, which enable in-depth goal-oriented collaboration, also enable the pursuit of social goals, i.e. the development and maintenance of social relationships. In theory, Reddit empowers its user base to create open, inclusive, ideologically heterogeneous communities that would emphasize the shared responsibility of all citizens over public affairs, as communitarianism requires. But, at the same time, redditors are also empowered to establish small, fragmented, interest-based and/or ideologically homogeneous communities, without considering the ethical imperative of shared political responsibility. Although the site encourages serendipitous content discovery (thereby trying to establish links between various smaller communities), and takes advantage of a number of other features that help counter excessive fragmentation and ideological homogenization, there are **no guarantees that Reddit would become a platform for "responsible" communities** (Etzioni 1999).

Finally, Reddit boasts structural features that render it, in theory, **an ideal setting for deliberation**. It is an open platform that invites the contribution of anyone and everyone, thus potentially creating a huge pool of opinion, information, and relevant arguments - this is the task of deliberation's *divergent* stage (Polletta et al. 2009). Subsequently, through up- and downvotes, it becomes possible to filter the assembled body of information, making sure that whatever is high quality becomes more visible - and therefore more influential (*convergent* stage). In Habermasian terms: through the voting mechanism, the "gentle force of strong arguments" is directly translated into communicative power - or at least some tangible influence over what becomes visible on Reddit. Or, using Bobbio's (2010) terms, by combining the facility of commenting with that of voting, Reddit opens up the possibility of oratory deliberation, where orators are "crowdsourced to prominence" on the basis of the value of their claims. But whether this actually happens is **contingent on how users behave**.

## Chapter 12. Analysis of the representative dimension

### 12.1. Sampling

Reddit comprises of a vast array of diverse subreddits, and thus there are both theoretical and practical objections to studying the site wholesale as it is. Consequently, I limited my analysis to a sample of four subreddits that, given their explicitly stated objectives, qualify as **constitutive** (see Chapter 3.1): contributing to the presidential election as a mediatized political process. These subreddits are as follows: **r/politics**, **r/2012elections**, **r/republicofpolitics**, and **r/politicaldiscussion**. They are dedicated to the supposedly non-partisan coverage of US politics in general, or the 2012 elections in particular.

My sample is the result of purposive sampling (Patton 1990, p.169), based on the simple idea that some data are more important than others. It is thus *not* representative of Reddit as such. Given the structure of Reddit, and the fact that it is constantly growing, it is not even possible to decide whether my sample would be representative of the actual performance of all the *constitutive* subreddits. But there are two reasons why I still believe the use of such a sample is justified.

First, the sample includes the largest of political subreddits, r/politics. This subreddit was created in 2007 (Huffman 2007), ostensibly in anticipation for the 2008 presidential election campaign, during which it enjoyed increased popularity (Olson 2013). Although the relative popularity of the subreddit diminished subsequently, it is still the 7<sup>th</sup> most popular subreddit on the site, and it did once again "experience a small resurgence of activity near November for the 2012 Presidential elections" (ibid). At the time of data collection<sup>58</sup>, r/politics used to be one of the default subreddits - included in the news selection of every new user, whether or not they were especially interested in politics (Angel 2013). For millions of redditors, r/politics was, and continues to be, *the* place for news about politics in the US; thus, the performance of this subreddit is especially important to evaluate.

In contrast, other subreddits in the sample are important precisely because they are *others* - i.e. different to r/politics in size and other settings -, enabling comparisons to be made.

Second, the analysis of a selection of different subreddits does open up avenues of theoretical generalization regarding the potential of social news sites. Each of these subreddits represents a particular configuration of Reddit's actualized affordances; and thus each illustrates a particular way

<sup>58</sup> Data was collected in September - October 2012; r/politics lost its default status in July 2013.

in which a politically important event might, in theory, be covered on the site. Thus their combined analysis is expected to be indicative of the site's *theoretical* potential as a constitutive media outlet.

**R/politics**, as described above, is a huge subreddit (at the time of data collection, roughly 2.2 million subscribers), under the self-designation "the place for current U.S. politics," with a focus on submission of links (content hosted elsewhere on the web), as opposed to self posts (content produced by redditors, hosted on Reddit itself). Redditors are not supposed to editorialize their link submissions: according to the informative text on the subreddit's landing page, "your headline should match the [submitted] article's headline, or quote the article to accurately represent the content of your submission." This is a subreddit where any user is allowed to submit content.

**R/2012elections** is a small (roughly 6,6K subscribers) subreddit "for news and discussion of the candidates running for election in the US House of Representatives, Senate, gubernatorial and Presidential races. [...] News and discussion about the general political climate is OK here too." Users are encouraged not to "downvote based on party affiliation." This is a *restricted* subreddit, meaning that only those approved by moderators are allowed to submit content. The subreddit doesn't formulate rules about the kind of content (links or self-posts) expected from submitters.

**R/republicofpolitics** is a tiny (roughly 2.5 thousand subscribers) subreddit that labels itself "The best anti-sensational news source [...]; a [sub]reddit for links and discussion about the policies used in governance, at both the national [US] and international level, and the relevance of political figures to those policies." This subreddit is a member of the "Republic Network:" an informal collection of subreddits that strives to distinguish itself from other subreddits by a strict enforcement of the reddiquette - informal rules that are expected to guarantee high-quality content.

With about 20 thousand subscribers, **r/politicaldiscussion** is tiny when compared to r/politics, but sizeable from the perspective of the other two subreddits mentioned above. This is a subreddit for "self posts concerning politics:" users are not expected to post links to external content, but instead to write their own pieces. So r/politicaldiscussion is an oddball, as its main emphasis is put *not* on gathering breaking news reports, but on passing commentary on news. The submission of questions is encouraged, as is the observance of reddiquette and constructive, civilised debate.

For the purposes of my research project, Reddit consisted exclusively of these 4 subreddits. They were sampled according to the following principles.

The most popular contents of the relevant subreddits were archived during September and October 2012. Using stratified sampling, a constructed week sample (Riffe et al. 1993) was created, which includes the output of the selected subreddits on a random Monday, a random Tuesday, etc., for all days of the week, in the two-month campaign period. Thus my sample period includes September 1, 3, and 23, as well as October 5, 10, 11 and 16, of the year 2012.

On these days, the *five most popular articles* submitted in each of the four relevant subreddits were retrieved and included in the analysed sample. Popularity was measured by submitted items' score, i.e. the difference between the number of up- and downvotes they received. Thus the sample is expected to be representative of what the audience of each analysed subreddit considered good, high-quality content.

Items in the sample that did not prove relevant (see Chapter 10.3) were discarded and replaced by subsequent items from the same subreddit. In total, 16 irrelevant articles were found.

However, activity in *r/republicofpolitics* was quite low - for most of the campaign period, few or no items were submitted in this subreddit, yielding a sample of only 5 items.

Four items in the sample have been unavailable by the time of data retrieval (link not set in). These were discarded and replaced in the sample by subsequent items from the same subreddit in which they were found.

Thus my sample consists of 110 items: 5 items for 7 days for 3 subreddits, and an additional 5 items from *r/republicofpolitics*.

Subreddit	items in the sample (n)
r/politics	35
r/2012elections	35
r/politicaldiscussion	35
r/republicofpolitics	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>110</b>

Table 10. Sample sizes in representational analysis

I contend that such a sample size is justifiable for the following reasons.

Previous studies have proven even small constructed week samples reliable. According to Riffe et al. (1993, p.139), "two constructed weeks would allow reliable estimates of [...] stories in a year's

worth of newspaper" content; whereas my study focused on a period of two months: the official campaign period before Election Day.

The rationale behind such stratified sampling is that it counters systematic variation tied to different days of the week. Admittedly, Riffe et al. wrote with daily papers in mind. But such variation is likely to affect the contents of social news sites as well, partly because much of the content that appears on social news sites is actually taken over from online editions of daily papers, partly because such daily variation has been the result of papers adapting to day-specific real-life events and reading habits - which ostensibly remain the same, regardless of audiences reading online or off. Notably, using a constructed week sample, I could take the effect of the televised presidential debates into consideration, without submitting to the idea that these debates were the only important event in the formation of the election narrative.

On each day of this constructed week, I included the 5 most popular articles submitted to each of the subreddits analysed. Five is an arbitrary choice. It was informed by the consideration that this would lead to a sample of manageable size, which nevertheless should give a good representation of the kinds of content redditors find popular. In particular, I contend that a larger number of articles would have resulted in a misleading sample, since the larger the sample, the fewer *popular* articles would have been included in it. I.e., the most popular article in each subreddit is expected to tell more about what redditors consider good content than the second most popular one. Picking the top 5 of each subreddit appeared a viable compromise between a focus on content that is popular, and focus on the breadth of each subreddit's coverage.

## **12.2. Principles of reliability and validity**

The representational analysis of Reddit takes advantage of qualitative as well as quantitative methods. In the case of these latter, items in the sample were coded by trained coders. Coders were proficient in English, either by virtue of being a native speaker or having substantial experience of using English as a second language. In order to avoid potential bias related to personal involvement (Choi et al. 2011), none of the coders was (or had been at any point) a citizen of the US. For every measure, a sub-sample was coded by two coders, and inter-coder reliability was established using Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  (2004a). This refers to a figure between 0 and 1, with 0 signifying that no connection could be established between coders' results, and 1 indicating perfect inter-coder agreement. Krippendorff (2004b) suggests that  $\alpha \geq 0.800$  indicates acceptable reliability even in cases where "human lives hang on the results of a content analysis;" while  $\alpha \geq 0.667$  suffices for tentative conclusions to be drawn. Reliability indicators are shown where appropriate.

In the case of qualitative measures, articles were analysed by myself. As I emphasize it elsewhere, these measures reflect my personal interpretations. I consider this fact when drawing conclusions from such measures.

In the case of qualitative as well as quantitative measures, their validity was asserted on the basis of the theories that informed their development.

\* \* \*

## 12.3. Content diversity

### 12.3.1. Who the news tell about

Each article in the sample was analysed for LEADING NEWSMAKERS and ALSO MENTIONED relevant persons. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using a sub-sample of 45 articles covering 3 days, and was found satisfactory for each variable (Krippendorff's  $\alpha$ : Obama - 0.946, Romney - 0.929, Biden - 0.794, Ryan - 1.0, Stein - 1.0, Johnson - 1.0, Goode - 1.0, Anderson - 1.0). Detailed results are shown in Table 11. The following charts illustrate the results of analysis.

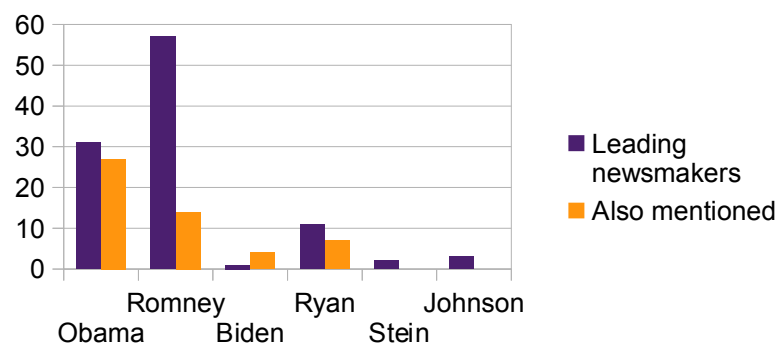


Figure 13. Newsmakers in the total sample ( $n = 110$ ); number of mentions

Considering all sampled subreddits together, Mitt Romney emerged as the person that drew most of the attention in the campaign, with Obama taking 2nd place. The Republican candidate stole the headlines on Reddit almost twice as many times as the incumbent (56 vs 31 articles), who in turn was "also mentioned" in twice as many articles as Romney (27 vs 14). These figures suggest a focus on the challenger, with articles often mentioning the incumbent president in order to provide contrastive context, and third party candidates making, at best, cameo appearances. This pattern

	r/politics		r/2012elections		r/politicaldiscussion		r/republicofpolitics		Total sample		Small subreddits	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Leading newsmakers												
Obama	13	37,14286	11	31,42857	6	17,14285714	1	20	31	28,181818182	18	24
Romney	23	65,71429	25	71,42857	9	25,71428571	0	0	57	51,818181818	34	45,333333333
Biden	0	0	0	0	1	2,857142857	0	0	1	0,9090909091	1	1,3333333333
Ryan	7	20	3	8,571429	1	2,857142857	0	0	11	10	4	5,3333333333
Stein	0	0	1	2,857143	1	2,857142857	0	0	2	1,8181818182	2	2,6666666667
Johnson	0	0	2	5,714286	1	2,857142857	0	0	3	2,7272727273	3	4
Also mentioned												
Obama	12	34,28571	9	25,71429	5	14,28571429	1	20	27	24,545454545	15	20
Romney	7	20	4	11,42857	2	5,714285714	1	20	14	12,727272727	7	9,3333333333
Biden	3	8,571429	1	2,857143	0	0	0	0	4	3,6363636364	1	1,3333333333
Ryan	4	11,42857	3	8,571429	0	0	0	0	7	6,3636363636	3	4
Stein	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Johnson	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Topic												
RACE	12	34,28571	22	62,85714	9	25,71428571	1	20	44	40	32	42,666666667
ISSUE	13	37,14286	7	20	14	40	1	20	35	31,818181818	22	29,333333333
PERSON	13	37,14286	9	25,71429	0	0	1	20	23	20,909090909	10	13,333333333
SYSTEM	6	17,14286	5	14,28571	13	37,14285714	3	60	27	24,545454545	21	28
Other	1	2,857143	2	5,714286	1	2,857142857	0	0	4	3,6363636364	3	4

Table 11. Content diversity on Reddit: number and % of articles featuring various topics and persons as newsmaker

emerges also when analysing r/politics and the smaller subreddits separately:

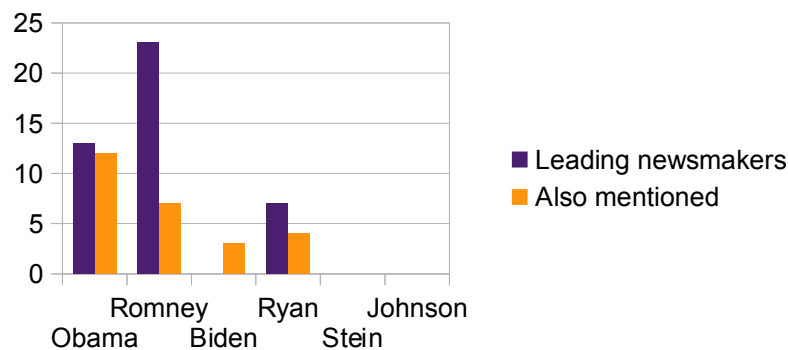


Figure 14. Newsmakers in *r/politics* ( $n = 35$ ); number of mentions

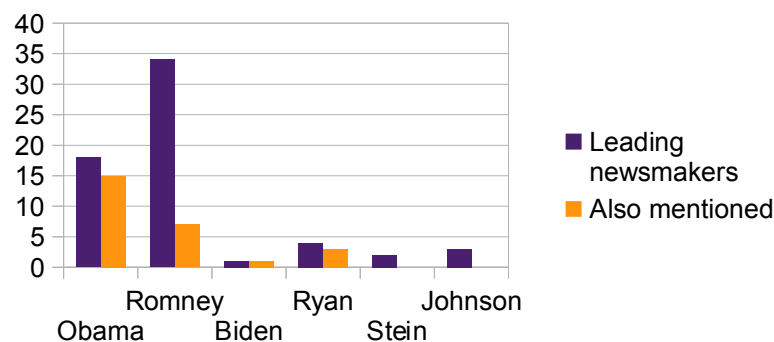


Figure 15. Newsmakers in smaller subreddits ( $n = 75$ ); number of mentions

### 12.3.2. What the news tell about

Each item in the sample was also analysed regarding the kinds of topics it addressed. Articles were tagged - put into non-exclusive categories - depending on their core part containing statements about the election as a horse race ("RACE"), about a social or political issue ("ISSUE"), a relevant politician as a person ("PERSON"), or the election as a particular decision-making system ("SYSTEM"). Thus the coding scheme allowed for articles covering the elections from multiple angles, e.g. writing about it as a horse race while also addressing some relevant issues.

Once again a subset of the sample ( $n = 45$ ) was used to establish inter-coder reliability, which was found acceptable for all four variables (Krippendorff's  $\alpha$ : RACE - 0.817, ISSUE - 0.746, PERSON - 1.0, SYSTEM - 0.802). The following chart provides an overview of results.



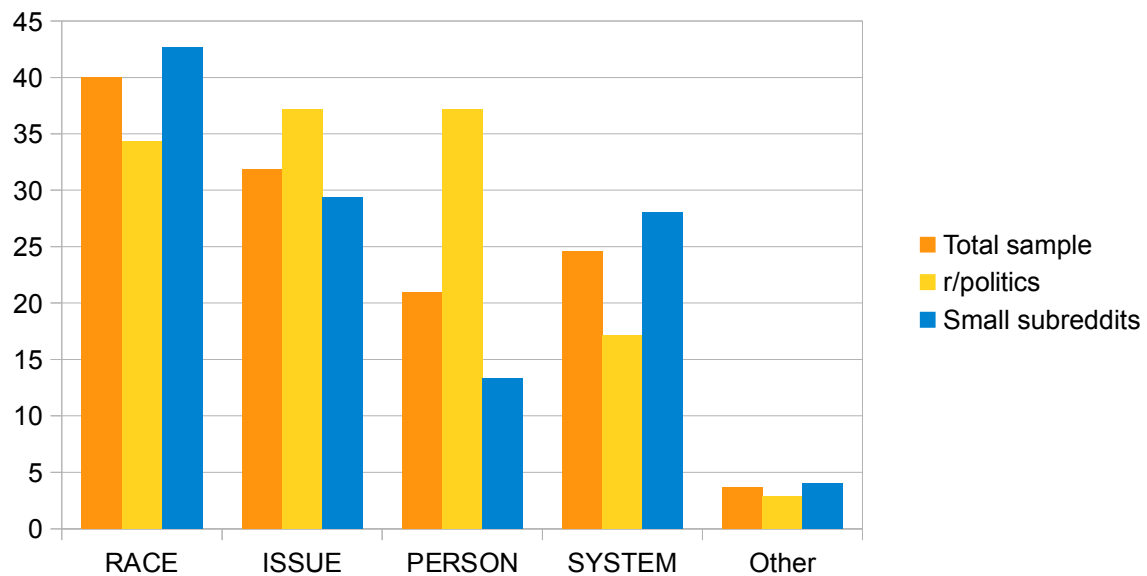


Figure 16. Distribution of topic categories between subreddits, %

Considering the sample as a whole, the most popular angle of coverage proved to be that of "horse race." Articles showed particular interest in polls and campaign strategies in the wake of the 1<sup>st</sup> televised debate of the candidates. This debate, a month before Election Day, was largely seen as having been won by an energetic Romney, or rather: lost by an enervate Obama. News networks were quick to establish a link between the debate performance and Romney's subsequent resurgence in polls in crucially important swing states such as Ohio (Abdullah 2012). When the debate showed that the race was far from over, polls became terribly interesting. The subsequent debates, as well as the Republican National Convention (August 27-30, featuring Clint Eastwood's monologue addressed to a chair), were also important determinants of the election's "horse race" narrative.

The presence of the game frame didn't mean that all substance was eliminated from the discourse surrounding the election. Both in r/politics and in smaller subreddits, about one article in three discussed politics through policies (proposed, hypothetical or already enacted), or issues.

The major difference between r/politics and its smaller counterparts pertains to the PERSON and SYSTEM categories. In r/politics, most items in the sample featured claims about a PERSON - and the analysis of newsmakers suggests that this person most often happened to be Mitt Romney - or an ISSUE. In contrast, smaller subreddits gave much more space to SYSTEM claims, often focusing on what's wrong with the election, both in practice (e.g. instances of voter registration fraud), and in theory (e.g. how to achieve a better, more representative, more diverse system of

opinion aggregation). R/politicaldiscussion didn't include any item which was coded PERSON. Four articles could not be tagged using the predetermined content categories. These discussed Mitt's father George Romney's unsuccessful 1968 presidential bid, an episode of Fox News' O'Reilly Factor, liberals' perceived hatred towards conservatives, and a decontextualized quote by Ayn Rand.

### 12.3.3. Summary: reasonable diversity

In all, content diversity in Reddit's *constitutive* sections was found to be **reasonable** - having an acceptable sense of proportion in deciding who and what to cover during an election campaign. But there was also room for improvement.

The fact that Mitt Romney emerged as most prominently featured in Reddit's coverage is a justifiable result. Voters could be expected to know more about Obama, who had already been president for a term, than about Romney. An informed decision between the two major candidates required more attention on the challenger.

At the same time, very little attention was paid to third party candidates. This arguably corresponds to the actual weight of these parties, and the chance they had to become important factors in the election. This is a catch-22: as redditors themselves pointed out (in agreement with e.g. Belt et al. 2012), one of the reasons why third parties cannot get more recognition nationwide is their designation of not being viable by the media - which is based on the belief that third parties have little recognition nationwide... Thus, the media's decision to single out viable and non-viable candidates becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In any case, skeptics might be right in saying that in the current political climate, increased coverage of smaller parties would be a waste of precious resources. But as the examples of Maine and Nebraska show - two states which relatively recently introduced proportional representation into their allocation of electors (see Chapter 10.1) -, election legislation can change; and thus it would be important to question the status quo by signalling voters that there is life beyond the two major parties. This did not happen in r/politics, the largest of subreddits, or in r/2012elections. R/politicaldiscussion performed better in this regard, but only marginally.

As for the **topics covered**, Reddit demonstrated **healthy diversity**. In general, the game frame was very popular - but this doesn't mean that the majority of articles would have focused on nothing but the horse race aspect of the election. In particular, r/politics dedicated as much attention to issues as to the politicians involved, while smaller subreddits, particularly r/politicaldiscussion, excelled at reflecting on the electoral system and its imperfections. Once again, this indicates that this small subreddit was a site of meaningful discussion of alternatives to the status quo.

## 12.4. Source diversity

### 12.4.1. Submitters

The following table describes the diversity of submitters (redditors who submit content that ends up on the top of a subreddit).

Subreddit	Number of submitters (n)	Mean (M), standard deviation (SD) and mode of submitted items per submitter	Submitter diversity (Simpson's D)	Contribution of the most active 10% and most active 20% of submitters (% of total submissions)
r/politics	32	M = 1.09, SD = 0.29, mode: 1	0.96	17.1 % -- 25.7 %
r/2012elections	22	M = 1.59, SD = 1.11, mode: 1	0.93	25.7 % -- 42.9 %
r/politicaldiscussion	34	M = 1.03, SD = 0.17, mode: 1	0.97	11.4 % -- 22.9 %
r/republicofpolitics	3	M = 1.67, SD = 0.47, mode: 2	0.64	40.0 %
Total sample	91	M = 1.21, SD = 0.64, mode: 1	0.98	22.7 % -- 33.6 %

Table 12. Diversity of submitters

Overall, the figures above testify to high diversity, where most redditors contributed to the front page of their respective subreddits by a single article. R/republicofpolitics is a notable exception: based on my data, that subreddit acted as a small and exclusive club, with very little activity - perhaps not the "best anti-sensational news" that the subreddit claims itself to be.

In the other subreddits, Simpson's diversity indices are consistently over 0.9. The index is a probability-based measure, to be interpreted in the following manner: in r/politics, there is a 96% chance that two randomly selected popular articles were submitted by two different redditors. The corresponding figure in r/politicaldiscussion is 97%.

Interestingly, the index is still quite high (93%) in the case of r/2012elections - which itself is a *restricted* subreddit, meaning that it is not open for submission to anyone, only to those approved by its moderators. Thus it is not surprising that, when illustrated by the familiar curve (Figure 17), this subreddit has the heaviest head: it is in this subreddit that the most active contributors are responsible for the largest share of contents (not counting r/republicofpolitics, which produced too little material for meaningful analysis).

But even in the case of r/2012elections, I would not describe the situation of the subreddit being dominated by small number of power users (cf. the case of Digg in Hogan 2008, pp.153–154). On the contrary - the figures above testify to a general openness, in which one does not have to be a privileged user in order to contribute to the site's agenda. At least this seems to have been the case

during the 2012 presidential election campaign. However, there are important qualifications to this statement.

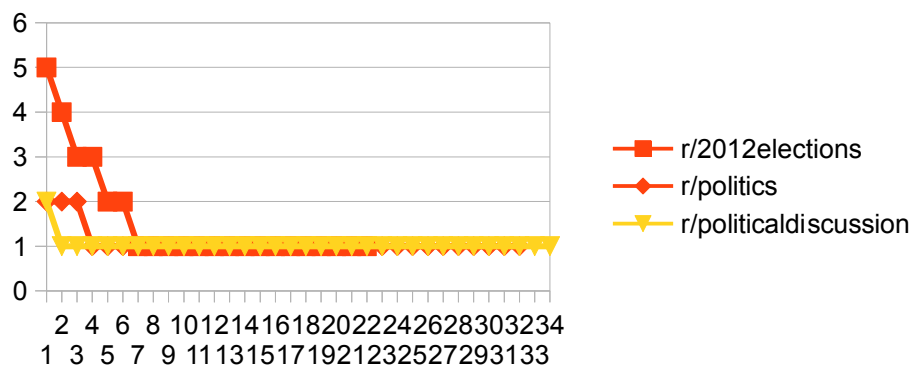


Figure 17. Distribution of popular posts / submitter (Y axis: number of popular posts submitted, X axis: individual submitters)

First of all it's important to recognize that Reddit, and similar sites, will in a sense always be dominated by a small minority: the minority of those users who actually bother to contribute to the site. And within this minority, only a fraction of these active redditors will actually have the honour of submitting an item that will become popular. As explained earlier, the opportunity might be open for everyone, but only so many redditors will in practice be able to take advantage of it. Or, to put it another way: millions of users have the possibility to submit articles, but the most popular article will always unfailingly be submitted by just one of them.

Second, diversity scores above cannot reveal whether the participation of particular users, or groups of users, is being hindered. We *do* know that the actual output of the site, in terms of submitters, is quite diverse, but we have no information about articles that were removed by moderators, or downvoted to oblivion because having been submitted by a particular person.

And third, perhaps most importantly: *nominal* diversity is great to have - but it cannot guarantee substantial diversity, in case all the various submitters turn out to be fundamentally alike. This is a tangible risk in the case of social news sites with pronounced user-to-user feedback mechanisms. The *lack* of nominal diversity would certainly be a more alarming prospect, as that would testify of practical domination by a few persons. Nominal diversity is valuable because it entertains the possibility that users behind different user names are in fact substantially different. But other measures - such as that of impartiality - should decide whether that is the actual case.

#### 12.4.2. Publishers

Here, the term "*publisher*" refers to persons and organizations that originally made items posted on Reddit publicly available. In a typical case, a *publisher* is a newspaper or television channel.

So far as *publishers* are concerned, r/politicaldiscussion is a special case. This subreddit approves only of self posts: textual entries that redditors themselves post to the site, and that are hosted on the site itself. So in this subreddit, *publishers* are always the redditors themselves who submit content to the site.

One of the questions I'm trying to answer in this study is whether citizen journalists - private individuals working outside institutional media frameworks -, alternative media, and established mainstream outlets are equally frequent guests on the front page of Reddit. Since r/politicaldiscussion doesn't approve of links by other *publishers*, I excluded it from this part of the analysis. R/politicaldiscussion is, by definition, a subreddit of redditors-as-private-individuals.

For the other subreddits, the *publisher* of each submitted item was identified, taking the potential difference between *hosts* and *publishers* into consideration. For instance- YouTube hosts videos uploaded by all sorts of different *publishers*. Thus, in the case of YouTube videos, the identity of *publishers* was established using clues such as the user name of the person who uploaded the video. Coding for this measure was done by a single coder, assuming straightforward markers of *publishers'* identity to be available.

Citizen journalists - private individuals using web services such as Reddit itself, Imgur, or YouTube, - were treated as a single category. The "private individual" category was only invoked in case no organization - such as a company, a foundation, a professional or interest-driven body - could be associated with the published item.

The following table describes the distribution of published items over *publishers* across the three subreddits analysed.

Subreddit	Number of distinct <i>publishers</i> (n)	Mean (M), standard deviation (SD) and mode of items per <i>publisher</i>	<i>Publisher</i> diversity (Simpson's D)	Contribution of the most active 10% and most active 20% of <i>publishers</i> (% of total submissions)
r/politics	24	M = 1.40, SD = 1.06, mode: 1	0.93	25.7 % -- 42.9 %
r/2012elections	26	M = 1.35, SD = 1.17, mode: 1	0.93	25.7 % -- 40.0 %
r/republicofpolitics	4	M = 1.25, SD = 0.43, mode: 1	0.72	40.0 %
Total sample, excluding r/politicaldiscussion	44*	M = 1.67, SD = 1.97, mode: 1	0.95	38.7 % -- 49.3 %

\*: overlaps occur due to publishers cited in multiple subreddits

Table 13. Diversity of publishers

Most *publishers* are represented in the sample by a single item. Publisher diversity, as measured by Simpson's D, is generally high - suggesting a 93% chance in the case of the two larger subreddits that two randomly selected items in the sample have different *publishers*. This is a marked contrast to the practice of reading a single daily paper, listening to any one radio station for news, or watching any one TV channel's news broadcast in the evening.

However, the weight of the most important *publishers* is also substantial: when looking at the total sample, the most active 9 *publishers* are responsible for almost 50% of the content. The following table lists these important *publishers*.

Publisher	Share of content in the sample (excl. r/politicaldiscussion)	Partisan attitude
private individuals acting outside media institutions	17.33 %	?
The New York Times	8 %	Officially non-partisan, but host to liberal/progressive blogs and commentators.
The Washington Post	5.3 %	Officially non-partisan, but host to liberal/progressive blogs and commentators.
The Huffington Post	4 %	Officially non-partisan, but perceived as liberal advocacy outlet by scholars (Bekken 2009) as well as Republican politicians (Calderone 2009).
Think Progress	4 %	A project of the Center for American Progress - a socially progressive and economically liberal advocacy organization (americanprogress.org).
Raw Story	4 %	Liberal/progressive (self designation).
NBCNews.com (formerly: MSNBC)	2.67 %	Officially non-partisan but often perceived as liberal-leaning in its commentary (Iyengar & Hahn 2009, p.34).
Yahoo! News	2.67 %	Officially non-partisan.

Table 14. Most important publishers on Reddit

The table reveals that private individuals, collectively, are responsible for the largest share of contents on Reddit.

I did not investigate potential astroturfing (established media organizations posing as private individuals in order to achieve greater authenticity), and it is therefore possible that at least some of these private individuals have been acting on behalf of other persons or organizations. But the figures above suggest that Reddit is in fact quite open to the contributions of anyone - regardless of coming from an established or alternative source. Perhaps this is the most important finding: source diversity figures suggest that **Reddit does seem to level the playing field** between established

media and individual users, providing these latter a valid, tangible chance to compete for the attention of large audiences.

The full list of *publishers* can be found in Appendix I. I would like to draw attention to the fact that not a single one of them could be accused of leaning towards conservative views. *Fox News* and the *Wall Street Journal* are conspicuously absent, as are talk radio programmes (e.g. Rush Limbaugh), sometimes seen as supporters of the Republican Party. Public service media, such as NPR or PBS are also unrepresented in the sample. In contrast, several advocacy groups with progressive agendas - e.g. *AlterNet*, *Democracy Now!* and *FreakOutNation* - can be found among Reddit's approved publishers. Finally, note that non-US-based media organizations are represented only by *Al Jazeera* - which itself contributed to Reddit's sampled newsworld with a single article.

Thus, the list of *publishers* suggests that the high nominal diversity of sources goes hand in hand with a **considerably lower - barely existing - ideological diversity**. Reddit does seem to offer a compilation of content from a large number of nominally different sources, but it also seems to be partial to progressive ones.

#### 12.4.3. Sources cited

In each article, the number of sources cited, by linking or other explicit means, was counted. However, sources of photographs were not counted as separate sources. Based on the assumption that the identification of cited sources would not be a controversial or complicated task, each article was only analysed by a single coder. The following table provides an overview of findings.

Subreddit	Average number of sources cited
r/politics (n = 35)	M = 2.23, SD = 2.10, mode: 2
r/2012elections (n = 35)	M = 2.68, SD = 3.94, mode: 1
r/politicaldiscussion (n = 35)	M = 0.51, SD = 1.13, mode: 0
r/republicofpolitics (n = 5)	M = 1.60, SD = 2.06, mode: 0
Total sample (n = 110)	M = 1.80, SD = 2.79, mode: 0

Table 15. Average number of sources cited in various subreddits

Thus, articles on r/politics tend to cite consistently 2 sources each, while r/2012elections follows a more erratic pattern, and r/politicaldiscussion tends to feature articles which quote few sources, if any at all. This supports the argument that the *genre* of self posts is different to that of linked articles. Specifically, in the case of r/politicaldiscussion, several articles posted there were simple

statements of personal opinion, or questions to the community, e.g.: "Anyone else notice a lack of Presidential bumper stickers on cars?"<sup>59</sup>

#### 12.4.4. Origins

Where do stories picked up on Reddit originate from?

The *origin* of each story was identified by a single coder. Each story was assigned a single *origin*. Most important sources of original reporting included the New York Times, PBS - explained by the fact that it broadcast the first of presidential debates -, the Washington Post, and NBCNews.com - in addition to private individuals, who, when taken together, emerged as the most important group of original producers, even when we ignore r/politicaldiscussion (which would skew results, given its high reliance on self posts).

However, no such case was found where the *origin* of an article was a private individual, but the *publisher* was an established media organ. This suggests that Reddit might in fact be unique among mainstream media organs in its capacity of influencing the agenda with stories based on original reporting by independent actors.

<i>Origin</i>	Share in the total sample (%); n = 75*
private individuals acting outside media institutions	10.67
The New York Times	8.00
PBS	6.67
The Washington Post	5.33
NBCNews.com	4.00

\*: excluding r/politicaldiscussion

Table 16. Most important origins of stories on Reddit

#### 12.4.5. Summary: mixed results

When considering various aspects of source diversity together, results are mixed. On the one hand, **exceeding nominal source diversity** was registered. This indicates Reddit's openness. For one thing, no evidence was found of a small inner circle of power users who would have dominated the site via their submissions. For another, the high nominal diversity of sources also underscored Reddit's ability to level the playing field between various actors of the public sphere in the competition for attention. In particular, the attention dedicated to the work of *citizen journalists*, acting outside established frameworks of media, is noteworthy.

On the other hand, there could be no mistake about the **ideological coherence** of the sources

59 [http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/zatde/anyone\\_else\\_notice\\_a\\_lack\\_of\\_presidential\\_bumper/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/zatde/anyone_else_notice_a_lack_of_presidential_bumper/)



represented in Reddit's compilation of content. Conservative sources were almost completely absent, suggesting that Reddit's coverage was systematically slanted towards liberal points of view. Thus the picture that emerges depicts *constitutive* sections of Reddit as providing fundamental equality to *everyone who happens to be a supporter of the Democratic party*; and excluding others. This was especially apparent in the case of r/politics, and least apparent in r/politicaldiscussion.

\* \* \*

## 12.5. Truthfulness

The truthfulness of articles was explored qualitatively, based on the identification of important claims that articles made. Although the logic of this analytical measure is based on the idea of multiple sources confirming/refuting statements, it also unavoidably relies on my personal interpretation, which is to be considered when evaluating the results.

A common characteristic among all examined subreddits was the **very low number of** articles which were built around **demonstrably, squarely untrue allegations**. In fact, only 6 such articles were found, and these relied on only 4 different untrue claims. These are revealing allegations, thus I present them here briefly.

In **r/politics**, 3 articles were found making important statements that were squarely false. Two of the three, relying on an unknown source, suggested that Romney's former company "controlled" another firm, which manufactured and owned voting machines that were to be used in the presidential election across a number of states<sup>60</sup>. The articles didn't make an open accusation of election fraud (commenters were not so faint at heart), but vaguely hinted that, at the very least, there's something fishy going on in the business circles related to the GOP candidate. But the claim was demonstrably false<sup>61</sup>. In the same subreddit, an opinion piece, originally published in the Washington Post, accused Republican politicians of "accidentally blowing the CIA's cover" in Libya<sup>62</sup>, at a public hearing about the 9/11/12 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi. This attack was a recurring issue during the campaign, cited by Republicans as an obvious example of the

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60 "Who Owns Voting Machines?" (The David Pakman Show, October 10, 2012, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sasfm\\_fTuyQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sasfm_fTuyQ)); "Owners Of Electronic Voting Machine Company Are Romney Super-Fans" (The Daily Dolt, October 10, 2012, <http://www.thedailydolt.com/2012/10/10/former-bain-employees-own-voting-machine-company-used-in-swing-states/>)

61 "Does Tagg Romney 'Own' Ohio Voting Machines?" (FactCheck.org, November 2, 2012, <http://www.factcheck.org/2012/11/does-tagg-romney-own-ohio-voting-machines/>)

62 "Letting us in on a secret" (The Washington Post - Opinions; October 10, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dana-milbank-letting-us-in-on-a-secret/2012/10/10/ba3136ca-132b-11e2-ba83-a7a396e6b2a7\\_story.html?hpid=z7](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dana-milbank-letting-us-in-on-a-secret/2012/10/10/ba3136ca-132b-11e2-ba83-a7a396e6b2a7_story.html?hpid=z7))

failure of the Obama-administration's foreign policy. But at the hearing, Republican politicians only stated information which had previously been reported e.g. by the New York Times<sup>63</sup> - hardly the mouthpiece of the GOP.

In sampled contents of **r/2012elections**, the only demonstrably and squarely untrue allegation was that Romney cheated during the 1<sup>st</sup> televised presidential debate: he was caught on camera smuggling in a cheat sheet and placing it on his lectern, in clear violation of the debate rules<sup>64</sup>. But the "cheat sheet" turned out to be just an empty handkerchief. This was acknowledged in an updated version of one of the articles that made the accusation.

In contrast, the only untrue article in **r/politicaldiscussion** did not accuse the Republicans or Romney of any wrongdoing; instead, it spread news about two statisticians forecasting a landslide victory for the GOP, based on a mathematical model that accurately predicted every presidential election since 1980<sup>65</sup>. This was a misunderstanding. The experts in question didn't have a model with an impeccable track record of predicting results; instead, they created a model which fit all past elections, and extrapolated it into the future. The actual outcome of the election aptly demonstrated the unreliability of that model<sup>66</sup>.

In sum, **few grossly untruthful/unreliable articles were found**. In addition to the ones mentioned above, some articles put forward claims which could not easily be declared either true or false, because they were formulated in general, unspecific terms, open to interpretation. For instance, a self post in r/politicaldiscussion argued that "sound bites have dumbed down our political discourse" - which I regarded as a very much debatable claim. But articles putting forward such dubious claims were also few (a single instance in r/politics, three in r/2012elections, six in r/politicaldiscussion).

Yet there is less reason for optimism than the findings above suggest, at least in the case of r/politics and r/2012elections. In these subreddits, roughly a third of the articles (10 and 9 items, respectively)

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63 "Deadly Attack in Libya Was Major Blow to C.I.A. Efforts" (The New York Times, September 23, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/24/world/africa/attack-in-libya-was-major-blow-to-cia-efforts.html?pagewanted=all>)

64 "Opinion: Upon Further Review: Mitt Romney May Have Cheated To Win The Debate" (CBS DC, October 5, 2012, <http://washington.cbslocal.com/2012/10/05/upon-further-review-mitt-romney-may-have-cheated-to-win-the-debate/#.UG77INBp4RA.reddit>); "Mitt Romney, it would seem, sneaked notes into the debate" (self post on Reddit, October 5, 2012, [http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/10z4lg/mitt\\_romney\\_it\\_would\\_seem\\_sneaked\\_notes\\_into\\_the/](http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/10z4lg/mitt_romney_it_would_seem_sneaked_notes_into_the/))

65 "Two Colorado University professors who have correctly predicted every election since 1980 have predicted a landslide for Romney." (Self post on Reddit, September 1, 2012, [http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z5x4h/two\\_colorado\\_university\\_professors\\_who\\_have/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z5x4h/two_colorado_university_professors_who_have/))

66 "The anti-Silver: CU prof who projected Romney landslide issues mea culpa" (The Denver Post, November 7, 2012, <http://blogs.denverpost.com/thespot/2012/11/07/antisilver-cu-prof-projected-romney-landslide-issues-mea-culpa/86219/>)

were found truthful in the sense of putting forward reliable claims - but **failing to present the whole truth**. They omitted relevant claims which would have affected their full significance. Several of such "truthful, but"-articles focused on how Mitt Romney changed his positions on important issues over time, and depending on his audience. E.g. in the 1<sup>st</sup> televised debate, he advocated more moderate positions on many issues than he'd done before. Redditors were eager to point out the inconsistencies in his campaign narrative, posting articles such as "Mitt Romney tells 533 lies in 30 weeks, Steve Benen documents them"<sup>67</sup>, and "Romney lied [in the debate] like a rug on every major topic he addressed, and here's documentation"<sup>68</sup>. Such claims were in fact demonstrably true, yet their full appreciation would have required additional information: e.g. that Romney did *not* tell 533 *different* lies in 30 weeks - he repeated several questionable claims on numerous occasions -; or, more importantly, that Romney was far from being the only one who lied (during the debate, and elsewhere<sup>69</sup>). Conservative pundits were grilled<sup>70</sup>, while liberals were embraced<sup>71</sup> without critique.

Thus **r/politics** and **r/2012elections** could *technically* be labelled truthful-as-reliable, but given the *presentation* of technically truthful claims, and the omission of significant information that would have helped the interpretation of the content of these subreddits, they failed to achieve *substantial* truthfulness. Readers who relied solely on these two subreddits in their following of the election could not have made an informed choice between candidates. Thus the performance of these two sections of Reddit is deemed **unacceptable for any model of democracy**.

**R/politicaldiscussion** fared much better in this respect, although it needs to be noted that the primary contents of this subreddit - self posts by redditors that served as starting points for discussion - formulated few claims that could meaningfully be interpreted in the dimension of truthfulness. Most often, these posts phrased questions, e.g. "What would happen if President Obama was assassinated the day before the election?<sup>72</sup>," or "What would have to happen between now and November 6 for Romney to defeat Obama?<sup>73</sup>."

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67 Patheos blogs / Slacktivist, August 29, 2012, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2012/08/29/mitt-romney-tells-533-lies-in-30-weeks-steve-benen-documents-them/>

68 The Daily Kos, October 4, 2012, <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/10/04/1140384/-Traditional-Social-Media-Collide-Over-Obama-Romney-Debate#>

69 "Dubious Denver Debate Declarations," Factcheck.org, October 4, 2012, <http://www.factcheck.org/2012/10/dubious-denver-debate-declarations/>

70 "Who Cares If Romney Lied During The Debate? He Looked Good!," NewsHounds, October 9, 2012, [http://www.newshounds.us/who\\_cares\\_if\\_romney\\_lied\\_during\\_the\\_debate\\_he\\_looked\\_good\\_10092012](http://www.newshounds.us/who_cares_if_romney_lied_during_the_debate_he_looked_good_10092012)

71 "Colbert: Lying worked for Romney, so f\*&k it," The Raw Story, October 5, 2012, <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/10/05/colbert-lying-worked-for-romney-so-fk-it/>

72 [http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z5xam/what\\_would\\_happen\\_if\\_president\\_obama\\_was/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z5xam/what_would_happen_if_president_obama_was/)

73 [http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/za6cp/what\\_would\\_have\\_to\\_happen\\_between\\_now\\_and/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/za6cp/what_would_have_to_happen_between_now_and/)

Finally, articles of r/republicofpolitics were judged truthful - but this subreddit hardly produced any content in the campaign period, thus its impact on the overall performance of Reddit was negligible.

\* \* \*

## **12.6. Impartiality**

### **12.6.1. Ideological impartiality**

Each item in the sample was analysed for impartiality in the following manner.

The article was associated with an imaginary agent, called the article's Producer. The Producer refers collectively to all those persons who contributed to the article having been published.

Coders inferred the perceived voting preference of the Producer of each article, indicating whether the Producer was most likely to vote for the Republican ticket (Romney/Ryan), for the Democratic ticket (Obama/Biden), for the ticket of any other, third party, or it was impossible to establish the Producer's likeliest choice beyond reasonable doubt. This last category was associated with impartiality: the lack of obvious signs that the Producer would favour one party over any other.

Coders interpreted the Producer's attitude in a dualistic framework, focusing on the contrast between Democrats and Republicans, unless the Producer referred explicitly to third parties. If a Producer was seen as arguing against the Republicans, coders treated this as a sign that the Producer preferred the Democrats - unless there were explicit mentions of third parties that would provide better options.

Every item in the sample was coded by two coders. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Krippendorff's  $\alpha$ . At 0.832, the measure suggested robust inter-coder reliability.

There were in total 11 cases where coders disagreed over the perceived voting preference of the Producer. Disagreements invariably were of the kind where one coder opted for the "neutral" option. In no case did it occur that coders would have associated the article with contrasting expressed voting preferences. Thus I present two estimates: a cautious one, where problematic articles are all filed under "impartial" (not indicating obvious support for any party or candidate); and a daring one, where all problematic articles are accepted as apparent, obvious expressions of support.

Subreddit	Estimate	Support: Democrats	Support: Republicans	Support: third parties	Uncertain/ Impartial	Total
r/politics	cautious	77.1	0	0	22.9	100
	daring	91.4	0	0	8.6	100
r/2012elections	cautious	48.6	0	5.7	45.7	100
	daring	54.3	0	5.7	40.0	100
r/politicaldiscussion	cautious	14.3	14.3	5.7	65.7	100
	daring	17.1	14.3	11.4	57.2	100
r/republicofpolitics	cautious	40.0	20.0	0	40.0	100
	daring	60.0	20.0	0	20.0	100
<b>Total sample</b>	<b>cautious</b>	<b>46.4</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>44.5</b>	<b>100</b>
	<b>daring</b>	<b>54.5</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>34.5</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 17. Producers' voting preference in various subreddits; % of articles

The most striking finding is the Democratic dominance on r/politics: although the subreddit is dedicated to a supposedly non-partisan coverage of news about US politics, the campaign period saw it turn into a collection of opinionated texts, where impartiality is accidental, and Republican or alternative, third-party views are not tolerated.

Overall, the sample does offer a fair amount of impartial texts, but the bulk of impartiality comes from r/politicaldiscussion, where posts are often brief questions or calls for others to state their opinion regarding an issue. As an aggregator of news published elsewhere, the analysed *constitutive* parts of Reddit seem to have a clear agenda. Conservative and third-party views seem to get recognition almost exclusively in the smaller subreddits.

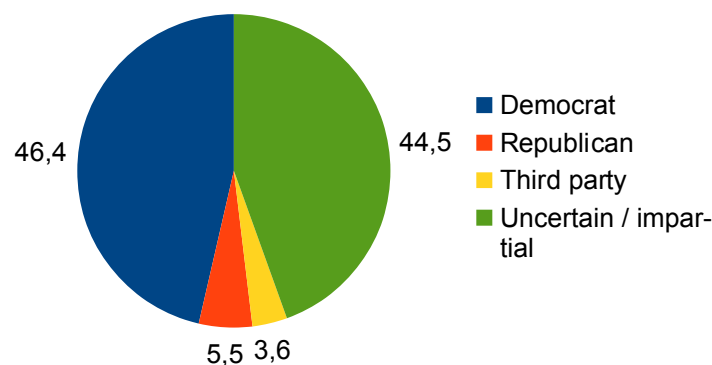


Figure 18. Cautious estimate of PRODUCERS' perceived voting preference (%), total sample (n = 110)

To refine the picture, Producers' opinion of the nominees was analysed too. Independent of

Producers' perceived voting preference, coders were asked to indicate whether the Producer of each article expressed positive, neutral, or negative opinion about Obama, Biden, Romney, and Ryan. Once again, each article was coded by two coders. However, although the percentage agreement between coders was consistently high, inter-coder reliability fell short of the acceptable in two out of four cases.

Variable	Krippendorff's $\alpha$
Producers' perceived opinion of Barack Obama	0.493
Producers' perceived opinion of Joe Biden	0.321
Producers' perceived opinion of Mitt Romney	0.840
Producers' perceived opinion of Paul Ryan	0.724

*n* = 110 articles

Table 18. (Un)Reliability in the measure of producers' perceived opinion about relevant persons

The apparent reason for the unreliability of these measures is that coders overwhelmingly used a single category: in 90 cases out of 110, both coders judged that the Producer had no particular opinion about Obama, so far as this was possible to infer from the article. The corresponding number in the case of Biden is 104. But Krippendorff's inter-coder reliability measure requires variance to be present, in order to provide evidence for the fact that coders' agreement is not the result of pure chance (Krippendorff 2004b, p.421). Thus, the figures above seem to confirm what is evident from the analysis of content diversity: most articles did not focus on the incumbents - instead, they dedicated most of their attention to the challengers, Romney and Ryan.

Inter-coder reliability was indeed substantial ( $\alpha = 0.840$ ) regarding Producers' opinion about Mitt Romney, and at least tentative conclusions could be drawn about expressed opinion concerning his running mate ( $\alpha = 0.724$ ).

As for the GOP presidential nominee, coders disagreed over 8 cases out of the total sample of 110. In each of these problematic cases, one coder saw the Producer's view of Romney as neutral. Again, I established cautious and daring estimates of Producers' view on Romney: in the former case, problematic cases were all counted as neutral, in the latter, as opinionated.

Subreddit	Estimate	Romney viewed positively	Producer remains neutral on Romney	Romney viewed negatively	Total
r/politics	cautious	0	45.7	54.3	100
	daring	0	31.4	68.6	100
r/2012elections	cautious	2.9	62.9	34.2	100
	daring	2.9	57.1	40.0	100
r/politicaldiscussion	cautious	0	91.4	8.6	100
	daring	2.9	88.5	8.6	100
r/republicofpolitics	cautious	0	80.0	20.0	100
	daring	0	80.0	20.0	100
<b>Total sample</b>	<b>cautious</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>69.1</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>100</b>
	<b>daring</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>61.8</b>	<b>36.4</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 19. Producers' perceived view of Mitt Romney; % of articles

The figures above strengthen the conviction that most of Reddit covered the campaign in a partisan manner, not giving space to opinion pieces that would have argued for the positive qualities of the candidate<sup>74</sup>. As in the previous measure, r/politicaldiscussion proved most balanced, and r/politics, the biggest and thus arguably most important subreddit in the sample, least balanced. Considering the whole sample, although most coverage is neutral, among those pieces that do express a definite opinion regarding the GOP candidate, negative ones far outweigh positive ones.

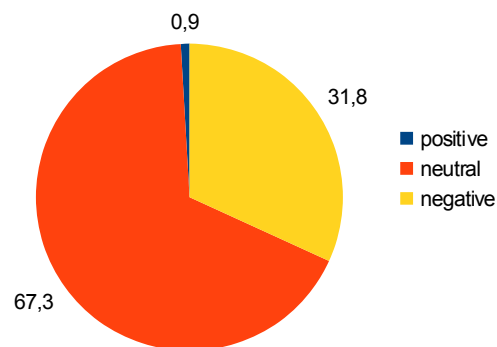


Figure 19. Cautious estimate of PRODUCERS' perceived view of Romney (%); total sample (n = 110)

In all, these figures suggest that *constitutive* sections of Reddit were not only acting in a partisan manner, they were also focused on conducting a negative campaign.

But perhaps the most striking finding is the conspicuous absence of opinion regarding third party candidates. The sample included a grand total of 3 articles in which at least one of them was

<sup>74</sup> Producers' expressed opinion about Ryan followed the same pattern.

mentioned by name - and none of these articles were posted in r/politics, where they had the chance of reaching a substantial audience. The theoretical existence of third parties was acknowledged in a larger number of articles, but in Reddit's coverage of the election campaign, actual third party candidates and their ideas were paid hardly any attention.

### 12.6.2. Promoting and enabling political activism

Each item in the sample was coded for two additional sets of variables, attempting to establish whether the article promoted and/or enabled different kinds of political activism: (1) campaigning and financial support, (2) voting or conscious abstinence, (3) other kinds of nonviolent action, and (4) other kinds of violent action. An article was to be coded as *promoting* political activism if it contained at least one *direct and explicit* call for a certain kind of action (e.g. "Don't forget to register to vote!"). An article was to be coded as *enabling or facilitating* political activism if it contained practical information on how to take engage in various kinds of activism (e.g. information on ID requirements for voting, or a hyperlink to an online petition).

A sub-sample of 77 articles was coded by two coders to establish inter-coder reliability. Results were mixed: for the measure of *promoting* activism, coders were in complete agreement (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 1.0$ ), but only 6 articles were found to promote some kind of activism. In the case of *enabling* activism, reliability is barely scraping the lower limit of what is generally acceptable ( $\alpha = 0.664$ ). Here, one of the coders found no article enabling any kind of political activism, while the other coder found one such item. This is an unfortunate example of high nominal agreement between coders which, due to a lack of variation in results, entertains the possibility of reliability, but does not prove it. This is something to consider when evaluating the figures below, pertaining to the total sample.

	<b>Campaigning and financial support</b>	<b>Voting or conscious abstinence</b>	<b>Other, nonviolent action</b>	<b>Violent action</b>	<b>Total</b>
Promoting	2 (1.8%)	2 (1.8%)	6 (5.4%)	0 (0.0%)	10 (9.0%)
Enabling	2 (1.8%)	2 (1.8%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (3.6%)

*n* = 110

Table 20. Number (and share) of articles promoting and enabling various kinds of political activism

R/politicaldiscussion was found to be the subreddit most obviously promoting activism (with 6 articles, among them the likes of "Direct democracy - responses to common criticism with solutions"<sup>75</sup>, and "Do you think making election day a national holiday would improve voter

<sup>75</sup> [http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/za45h/direct\\_democracy\\_response\\_to\\_common\\_criticism/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/za45h/direct_democracy_response_to_common_criticism/)



turnout?<sup>76</sup>).

In contrast, most "enabling" articles (3 out of 4) appeared in r/politics. One of these contained brief snippets of information regarding ID requirements for voters. Another, a video produced by the Obama campaign, republished on *The Daily Kos*, contained hyperlinks where the viewer could sign up for the campaign's mailing list, and/or give donations. And the third contained a hyperlink to a community-edited database (a wiki) of candidates for Congressional election. My study focuses on the presidential election, but this particular article was deemed relevant, because it used the presidential election to explicitly frame the Congressional one (arguing that the next president will only be able to work if supported by a friendly Congress). Finally, r/2012elections featured the fourth "enabling" article: a piece on Green Party candidate Jill Stein, hosted on her own website, adorned with a button urging visitors to donate.

In sum, **only a small fraction of articles promoted any kind of political activism**, and even fewer helped its readers become active in practice. Activism, in the Reddit's coverage of the election, did not emerge as an especially important civic virtue; and the site did not emerge as a site of organizing, or orchestrating, political action (unlike, for instance, Twitter in the case of the Occupy!-movements).

#### **12.6.3. Summary: slanted coverage**

The analysis of *constitutive* subreddits' contents further confirmed that the site as a whole was **hardly an impartial observer** of the election.

In terms of represented political ideologies, r/politics' performance was the worst: no such article was found in this subreddit which supported conservatives, or any third party's stances. In contrast, the vast majority of articles (even when using a cautious estimate) expressed support for the Democrats, and only a small minority of contents attempted to refrain from openly espousing a party or ideology. Considering the measure of content diversity, showing r/politics' focus on Mitt Romney, what emerges is a picture of the subreddit as an instrument of anti-Romney campaigning. If Barack Obama's first presidential campaign was a historical moment, establishing him as the hero of "hope and change," the narrative propagated by Reddit in 2012 seemed quite different - focusing less on the achievements of Obama, and more on the villainy of Romney and Ryan.

The systematic slant of this subreddit is especially problematic given the fact that r/politics is the largest of *constitutive* subreddits, and for many, *the only* source of political information on Reddit.

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76 [http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/zb2uv/do\\_you\\_think\\_making\\_election\\_day\\_a\\_national/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/zb2uv/do_you_think_making_election_day_a_national/)

R/2012elections performed marginally better; while **r/politicaldiscussion, again, was found to be the most impartial** of the subreddits analysed, refusing to take part in anti-GOP campaign activities of other subreddits. Most of this latter subreddit's articles eschewed expressing support for any party or candidate, but the ones that did so were roughly equally divided between Democrats, Republicans, and third parties, once again implying at least tentative steps towards questioning the 2-party status quo.

When it comes to the support of political activism - an important demand for the communitarian understanding of democracy -, results are similarly disappointing. Regardless of the analysed subreddit, hardly any articles were found which encouraged citizen's participation. If there's a silver lining here, it is the fact that no article advocated violence, either.

But, more importantly, the number of articles *facilitating* participation by providing information that would have enabled becoming active was even lower - 4, in a total sample of 110. Thus, **taking responsible political action didn't emerge as an especially important value** in Reddit's coverage of the election.

As suggested in Chapter 9.3.3/b, emphasizing the importance of political participation would be especially important in the case of r/politics - a default subreddit that was visible and accessible to redditors without an above average interest in politics. In fact, it was in r/politics that most articles practically enabling political activism turned up; however, this still only meant 3 articles in total - amounting to less than 3% of the total sample.

## 12.7. Comprehensive temporal orientation

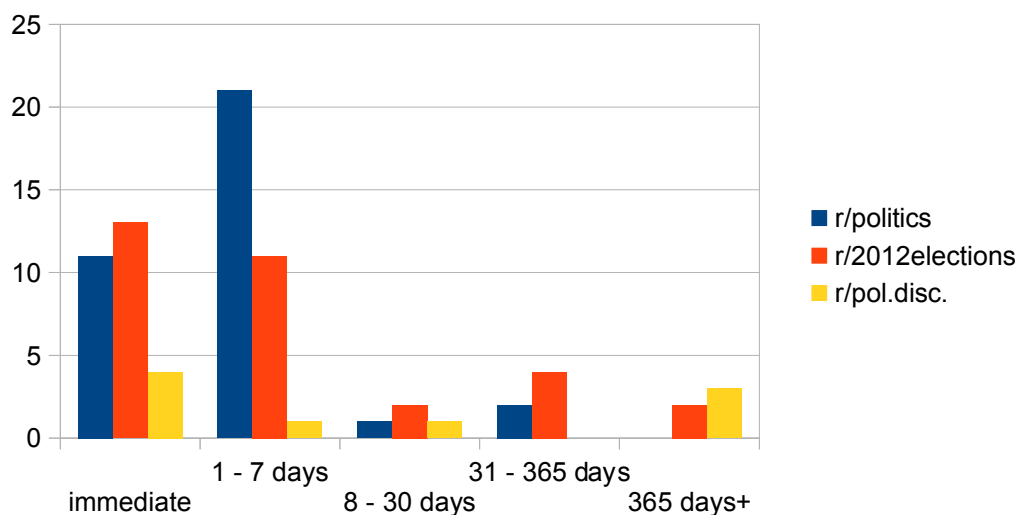


Figure 20. Number of articles in various subreddits categorized by difference between original and subsequent publication (if available)

Items in the sample were categorized on the basis of the difference between their original publication date, and the dates when they were submitted to Reddit.

Both in **r/politics** and in **r/2012elections**, the majority of articles (91.4% and 68.6%, respectively) were submitted to Reddit either on the day of their original publication, or one day after, which indicates a strong, and unsurprising, short-term orientation. Then, r/politics' attention span seems to trail off after one week, while r/2012elections included a somewhat larger number of articles that revisited events and issues of the past. Notable examples include a piece titled "Mitt Romney tells 533 lies in 20 weeks, Steve Benen documents them<sup>77</sup>," which is essentially a directory of archived material going back to January 2012; and the New Yorker's piece on tycoon David Koch's involvement with the Republican National Convention<sup>78</sup> - framed as an update to a 2010 feature article on "the billionaire brothers who are waging a war against Obama<sup>79</sup>."

In sum, these two subreddits exhibited a predominant focus on current events, with an occasional glance from a historical perspective. As suggested in 9.3.4., this is **perfectly justifiable** - although r/politics could certainly pay more attention to the past.

The picture is not exactly clear in the case of **r/politicaldiscussion**, which is dedicated to discussion, as opposed to news reporting. In this subreddit, a large majority of articles in the sample (26 items, or 74%) did not explicitly cite sources, or contained other information from which their

77 <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2012/08/29/mitt-romney-tells-533-lies-in-30-weeks-steve-benen-documents-them/>

78 <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2012/09/david-koch-steps-out-of-the-shadows.html>

79 [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/30/100830fa\\_fact\\_mayer](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/30/100830fa_fact_mayer)

temporal orientation could have been inferred. The few items that *did* cite sources or referred explicitly to a particular date tended to focus either on recent developments, *or* on events of the historical past: e.g. one post consisted of a quote originally published in 1890<sup>80</sup>; another cited Ayn Rand<sup>81</sup> (from the mid-60s); and a third prompted readers to discuss a quote from 1988<sup>82</sup>, regarding the organization behind presidential debates. These examples demonstrate perfectly what "long-term orientation" might mean in practice: reflecting on current events from a historical perspective. But it would be difficult to draw further conclusions from such a small sample.

\* \* \*

## 12.8. Civility

For the purposes of this research, civility was defined as the lack of incivility, understood as 1) making a verbalized threat, 2) committing an *ad hominem* attack, or 3) discriminating against a person or group. A single instance of any of these devices of incivility rendered an article uncivil. Inter-coder reliability was established using a sub-sample of 65 articles (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 0.739$ ).

By this measure, Reddit's coverage of the 2012 election largely conformed to norms of civility, with only 6 articles (5.45%) found uncivil.

Instances of incivility included a reference to Paul Ryan as "a hollow bigot"<sup>83</sup>, claiming that Mitt Romney "ha[d] a religious conviction about being able to lie"<sup>84</sup>, and the assertion that Republicans are "a gang [...], a herd of clawing cats [...] sabotaging our country"<sup>85</sup>. These claims were coded as uncivil because in their context they painted "the other side" (i.e. the Republicans, or some of their prominent representatives) as not being in the position to make any kind of claim worthy of consideration, thus blocking the way to subsequent discussion.

In a less obvious show of incivility, a redditor referred to a cultural divide between "the America that exists in large cities (diverse, adaptive, technologically minded, liberal etc.), and [the one] that exists in the suburbs and rural areas [which] rejects science, is more traditional, isolationist etc"<sup>86</sup>. This was coded as an instance of discrimination.

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80 "Father of neoclassical economy cannot decide who to vote for in 2012 - in 1890."  
([http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11kc7v/father\\_of\\_neoclassical\\_economics\\_cant\\_decide\\_who/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11kc7v/father_of_neoclassical_economics_cant_decide_who/))

81 "Minority rights?" ([http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z7b6h/minority\\_rights/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z7b6h/minority_rights/))

82 "Great quote regarding the shady organization which runs the presidential debates"  
([http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11bl82/great\\_quote\\_regarding\\_the\\_shady\\_organization/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11bl82/great_quote_regarding_the_shady_organization/))

83 <http://www.villagevoice.com/2012-10-10/columns/mitt-romney-stupidity-Michael-Musto/>

84 <http://www.alternet.org/election-2012/matt-taibbi-reveals-how-romney-made-his-fortune-it-aint-pretty-and-he-shouldnt-be>

85 <http://www.nationalmemo.com/lol-of-the-week-george-w-bush-kept-us-safe/>

86 [http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/119awk/what\\_will\\_happen\\_to\\_america\\_if\\_romney\\_wins/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/119awk/what_will_happen_to_america_if_romney_wins/)

In sum, civility constitutes one analytical dimension where Reddit **met the normative performance criteria** set by communitarian and deliberative models of democracy. However, it is once again imperative to consider civility in the light of Reddit's slanted coverage. As it turns out, with the exception of r/politicaldiscussion, the site acted as a partisan platform, campaigning against Mitt Romney, and not willing to consider alternative solutions that would have upset the two-party status quo. This means that *acceptable levels of civility hardly imply any kind of tolerance toward alternative points of view*.

In other words- it is easy being civil if we all agree in the first place.

\* \* \*

## 12.9. Reasoned argumentation

The presence of arguments was ascertained using both qualitative and quantitative methods. On a first approach, I used content diversity as a proxy to assess the ratio of articles which did present arguments for taking a particular position. The following table sums up the results; "articles of substance" refers to those items in the sample whose coverage included more than writing about the election as a horse race.

Subreddit	Number of articles of substance	Share of articles of substance (%)
r/politics (n = 35)	26	74.29
r/2012elections (n = 35)	19	54.29
r/politicaldiscussion (n = 35)	26	74.29
r/republicofpolitics (n = 5)	5	100.00
Total sample (n = 110)	76	69.09

Table 21. Number and share of articles of substance in various subreddits

Thus, the above figures suggest that the majority of articles in the majority of subreddits promise to be at least springboard for deliberation - although the numbers above don't reveal anything about the quality of the argumentation.

On a second approach, distinct lines of argument were identified in "articles with substance" - i.e. those articles whose coverage was not solely confined to the game frame.

Subreddit	Number of arguments identified	Average number of distinct lines of argument / article
r/politics (n = 26)	49	1.88
r/2012elections (n = 19)	25	1.32
r/politicaldiscussion (n = 26)	16	0.61
r/republicofpolitics (n = 5)	3	0.60
Total sample (n = 76)	112	1.22

*Table 22. Arguments in the contents of various subreddits*

Thus, as a rule of thumb, reading two articles from Reddit's compilation provided the reader with three distinct lines of argument justifying various political positions; except in the case of r/republicofpolitics - however, the small sample in this subreddit rendered it an unsuitable basis for generalizations -, and that of r/politicaldiscussion. This latter subreddit is oriented at discussion, and starting posts, which constitute the articles as objects of analysis, are often brief questions or calls for discussion. This explains why they are, in themselves, poor sources of many and diverse arguments. An example posted on 23 September, 2012, by user "cubixguy77" under the title "What issues are not receiving enough attention in this election cycle, and why do they deserve our attention?", in its entirety:

"The pettiness of the 24 hour news cycle certainly narrows the scope of political discussion in the media. Which issues are too important to ignore?<sup>87</sup>"

Thus, the article doesn't provide any kind of reason for voting this way or that; instead, it is inviting the contribution of others to find such reasons, or at least to identify issues on which candidates' positions can be evaluated.

Given the stratified nature of the sample - a "constructed week," consisting of a randomly selected Monday, Tuesday, etc. -, it would be difficult to construct a narrative from the emerging content of articles. Two recurring lines of argument are, however, noteworthy. The most frequent line of argument against Mitt Romney focused on the fact that he seemed to change his positions for political gains, leaving voters at a doubt as to what he actually stood for, while also undermining his credibility (e.g. "Mitt Romney Leads Us Into an Age of Stupidity<sup>88</sup>"). And in smaller subreddits, particularly in r/politicaldiscussion, the existing electoral system was often criticized, on the grounds that it was not representative enough (e.g. "Why don't third-party candidates respond to the

<sup>87</sup> [http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10byav/what\\_issues\\_are\\_not\\_receiving\\_enough\\_attention\\_in/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10byav/what_issues_are_not_receiving_enough_attention_in/)

<sup>88</sup> Village Voice, 10 October 2012 (<http://www.villagevoice.com/2012-10-10/columns/mitt-romney-stupidity-Michael-Musto/>)

debate questions as though they were allowed to attend?<sup>89</sup>").

I interpret these results as **acceptable**, in **providing a reasonable basis for deliberation**. Almost every article presented at least one line of argument concerning a given issue or person involved. In other words, reading any single article would hardly have provided its readers with comprehensive knowledge about any subject, but doing so would have revealed at least one important point that should be considered when trying to reach a decision.

Findings can be contextualized when considering hypothetical situations which would be clearly inadmissible. One such case would have been if the "game frame" - covering elections as a horse race, without paying much attention to the substance of the debate - had dominated the coverage. This did not happen on Reddit.

Another cause for alarm would have been if the number of articles in the sample would have significantly surpassed the number of emerging reasons - meaning that a significant part of articles didn't put forward any kind of reasoned line of argument at all. This did happen in the case of r/politicaldiscussion; but it is explained by the fact that many articles in this thread only formulated a question, inviting the response of other redditors.

However, I emphasise that this analytical measure utilized a broad, lenient concept of "argument." In order to find out whether or not *good* arguments were presented in articles, as opposed to just any kind of argument, the reflexivity of articles was assessed.

\* \* \*

#### **12.10. External reflexivity**

In a manner similar to the analysis of arguments, the reflexivity of Reddit's primary contents was analysed using both quantitative and qualitative measures.

First, content diversity was once again used as a proxy to explore how often articles featured politicians representing diverging ideologies.

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89 [http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10zjiq/why\\_dont\\_thirdparty\\_candidates\\_respond\\_to\\_the/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10zjiq/why_dont_thirdparty_candidates_respond_to_the/)

Subreddit	Share of articles featuring LEADING NEWSMAKERS from different parties (%)	Share of articles featuring relevant persons from different parties (%)
r/politics (n = 35)	28.57	60.00
r/2012elections (n = 35)	25.71	54.29
r/politicaldiscussion (n = 35)	8.57	22.86
r/republicofpolitics (n = 5)	0	20.00
Total sample (n = 110)	20.90	44.54

*Table 23. Share of articles with multiple newsmakers from rival parties*

When considering LEADING NEWSMAKERS only, results are not very promising, especially not if we consider that only a single article featured more than 2 LEADING NEWSMAKERS. The article in question, titled "Gary Johnson has best ever haul<sup>90</sup>," mentioned Johnson, Obama, and Romney in its first paragraph, in a comparison of the success of their respective fundraising campaigns. But this item was an exception, not the rule: on average, only about one article in five considered even two leading newsmakers with divergent views. When considering persons ALSO MENTIONED too, the analysis revealed that less than half of all articles in the sample featured candidates of different parties.

In this measure, it is r/politicaldiscussion that brings down the average (r/republicofpolitics should not be seriously considered given its tiny newsworld). This is at least partly explained by the fact that items in that subreddit are brief self posts by redditors, rarely presenting more than a single thought or question to invite discussion.

Next, different lines of argument that emerged from the articles were classified as either SIMPLE, CONSIDERED, or somewhere in between (HALF-CONSIDERED). These latter arguments were counted as "half a considered" argument, yielding the following results:

Subreddit (number of arguments identified)	Number of CONSIDERED lines of argument identified	Share of CONSIDERED arguments in total number of arguments (%)
r/politics (n = 49)	19	38.77
r/2012elections (n = 25)	11	44.00
r/politicaldiscussion (n = 35)	7	43.75
r/republicofpolitics (n = 3)	3	100
Total sample (n = 112)	46.5	43.01

*Table 24. Number and share of CONSIDERED arguments in various subreddits*

The figures above suggest that in the 3 subreddits that actually yielded a sizeable sample, *less than*

<sup>90</sup> Politico, 20 September 2012, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0912/81456.html>



*half of the arguments (ca. 43%) were questioned and explored critically.*

An example of a CONSIDERED argument was presented by an article originally published on The Raw Story, exploring Mitt Romney's proposed tax plans<sup>91</sup>. The piece carefully investigated the claim that Romney had thus far failed to show how his somewhat vague tax proposals could have been filled with substance. Romney's plans promised tax cuts for everyone, making up for lost revenue by eliminating loopholes; but some experts claimed that the plans could not work without, in effect, raising taxes for the middle class. The article in question quoted several experts on both sides, and Romney himself, and in general, presented the relevant information in a thorough, comprehensive, clear-cut fashion.

On the same day, a SIMPLE argument was made by a post in r/politicaldiscussion, under the title "Any women here voting for Romney? If so, why?"<sup>92</sup> The article consisted of two brief sentences, suggesting that the "Republican record on women's issues" is dismal, providing a very clear reason not to vote for the GOP, but not actually substantiating the claim in any way.

And as an example of a HALF-CONSIDERED argument, consider an article submitted to r/2012elections, still on 16 October, about the Green Party's Jill Stein<sup>93</sup>. The article calls for change in the election system, and claims in particular that the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) is "a puppet [that] serves the interests of the Democrats, Republicans and the big corporations that fund both of them." The article states Stein's case clearly, and it presents a seemingly convincing example of the system's unfairness. Yet it does not reflect at all on the position of the CPD, or that of the major parties; and it does not substantiate the claim that these latter would be "controlled by big corporations," as opposed to the citizens themselves. Hence, I rated this argument as HALF-CONSIDERED.

One way to interpret the above figures would be the following. In a hypothetical situation where every argument that emerges from articles was half-considered, the ratio of CONSIDERED to SIMPLE arguments would amount to 1/2, or 50%. That figure would indicate that every argument that is brought to the table is at least questioned, or tentatively explored, opening the door to further enquiry. I contend that this measure would be a reasonable minimal criteria for deliberation.

But the figures above fell short of that magic number, suggesting, in a preliminary evaluation, that although articles might have provided a springboard for deliberation, they, in themselves, were **not sufficiently deliberative**.

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91 <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/10/16/anderson-cooper-calls-out-romney-for-claiming-blog-posts-are-tax-plan-studies/>

92 [http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11kf8i/any\\_women\\_here\\_voting\\_for\\_romney\\_if\\_so\\_why/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11kf8i/any_women_here_voting_for_romney_if_so_why/)

93 [http://www.jillstein.org/mockumentary\\_debate?utm\\_campaign=cpd\\_arrest1&recruiter\\_id=199469&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=jillstein](http://www.jillstein.org/mockumentary_debate?utm_campaign=cpd_arrest1&recruiter_id=199469&utm_medium=email&utm_source=jillstein)

Interestingly, Wessler (2008, p.8) cites multiple previous studies that "showed that about 40% of all claims found in German newspaper, radio and television coverage" were "justified," i.e. backed up by acceptable reasons. I'd be wary of drawing far-reaching conclusions from this coincidence, given the different objects and methods of analysis, but at any rate, further studies are invited to investigate whether this figure represents a pattern common to constitutive media in different media systems.

\* \* \*

### 12.11. Internal reflexivity

Reddit's internal reflexivity was analysed on the basis of differences between items' original and user-given headlines. This measure is not applicable for r/politicaldiscussion, because this subreddit is dedicated to self posts - where user-given and original titles are always one and the same. Each item in the sample was coded by two coders, and substantial inter-coder reliability was established (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 0.825^{94}$ ). The following table details the results: the number and ratio of SAME and DIFFERENT user-given headlines, as well as the distribution of DIFFERENT user-given titles across categories. Since categories are non-exclusive, their combined share may exceed 100%.

	<b>SAME (%)</b>	<b>DIFFERENT (%)</b>	<b>SHIFT IN FOCUS (share in DIFF., %)</b>	<b>SUMMARY (share in DIFF., %)</b>	<b>OPINION (share in DIFF., %)</b>	<b>other*</b>
r/politics (n = 35)	12 (34.3%)	23 (65.7%)	17 (73.9%)	8 (34.8%)	0	0
r/2012elections (n = 35)	17 (48.6%)	18 (51.4%)	10 (55.5%)	9 (50%)	1 (5.5%)	1 (5.5%)
r/republicofpolitics (n=5)	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	0	1 (100%)	0	0
Total sample** (n = 75)	33 (44%)	42 (56%)	27 (64.3%)	18 (42.9%)	1 (1.3%)	1 (1.3%)

\*: cases where the user-given title is DIFFERENT, but the relationship between the user-given title and the article doesn't fit any of the 3 categories listed (SHIFT IN FOCUS, SUMMARY, OPINION)

\*\* : excluding r/politicaldiscussion, where user-given titles and original headlines are always necessarily the same

Table 25. Original vs user-given titles of articles

These figures reveal that users tend to give new titles to their submitted items slightly more often than not (56 vs 44% in the total sample).

94 Each article was assigned a string of numerals on the basis of coding. For instance, SAME user-given titles were coded 0; those that introduced a SHIFT IN FOCUS as well as a SUMMARY were coded 12, etc. Inter-coder reliability was established on the basis of comparison between sets of strings assigned by the two coders, as opposed to the pairwise comparison of each variable.

In the case of r/politics, most of the DIFFERENT user-given titles introduced a shift in focus, usually by citing a direct quote from the article<sup>95</sup>. Some of the items also provided a short summary<sup>96</sup>, but none of them offered explicit opinion on the article.

In the case of r/2012elections, providing a summary was essentially as common as offering a shift in focus, and this subreddit included the single case where explicit opinion was expressed on the article. This was the case of the article being an image: a mock-up of New Yorker magazine's cover, which referred to the first presidential debate as well as Clint Eastwood's notable empty chair speech at the Republican National Convention. The user-given title was "Here's the cover of next week's New Yorker Magazine. *Nailed it.*"<sup>97</sup>

Overall, the figures indicate **moderate levels of reflexivity**. One way to evaluate Reddit's performance in this regard would be to compare it to that of algorithmic news aggregators, such as Google News. Such aggregators are not in the position to exercise reflexivity at all. Taking this as a baseline, an indicator suggesting that at least minimal levels of reflexivity are exercised about half of the time is grounds for reasonable optimism.

On the other hand, the lack of explicit expressions of opinion in titles indicate deference to the default, implicit organizing principle of Reddit: i.e. that users submit content that they consider *good*. This might sound like a bone-headed observation - after all, why else would they submit content?, or why would anyone vote up something *other than good*? One reason would be the exercise of media critique. Submitted links could point to inferior, biased, sensationalist etc. coverage, and the user-given headline could draw attention to, and comment on, the inferior quality of the linked material.

But Reddit did not emerge as a site of such reflexive media critique.

\* \* \*

## 12.12. Summary: much room for improvement

Popular articles in *constitutive* subreddits tended to be **partisan** (opposing the Republican Party in general, and Mitt Romney in particular), **complacent** (not treating political activism and participation as something especially laudable), **civil**, and focusing on **current developments**, without an especially notable tendency to consider a broader, historical perspective. They originated

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<sup>95</sup> An example:

[http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/10ysgk/i\\_just\\_want\\_to\\_make\\_sure\\_i\\_got\\_this\\_straight\\_hell/](http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/10ysgk/i_just_want_to_make_sure_i_got_this_straight_hell/)

<sup>96</sup> An example:

[http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/11c6oo/woman\\_at\\_vp\\_debate\\_calls\\_obama\\_a\\_communist\\_gets/](http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/11c6oo/woman_at_vp_debate_calls_obama_a_communist_gets/)

<sup>97</sup> [http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/110p9e/heres\\_the\\_cover\\_of\\_next\\_weeks\\_new\\_yorker\\_magazine/](http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/110p9e/heres_the_cover_of_next_weeks_new_yorker_magazine/)

from a **large number of different sources** and origins, yet there was a **strong ideological cohesion** between these sources and origins. They could have acted as **reasonable basis for deliberation**, but not more: they did provide arguments to be evaluated in the context of the election, but they exhibited **low** - or at best moderate - **levels of reflexivity**, meaning that they rarely engaged critically with said arguments. Articles in smaller subreddits questioned the validity of the electoral system and the two-party, first-past-the-post system in general, and discussed alternatives.

## Chapter 13. Analysis of the interactional dimension

### 13.1. Sampling

The analysis of Reddit as a site of interaction takes advantage of various, qualitative and quantitative variants of content analysis. Different methods require different samples; what follows is an overview of methods, sampling principles and analytical units.

(a) **Level of participation and discursive interactivity.** Participation was examined through proxy metrics, such as the number of subscribers to subreddits, and the number of messages in a sample of threads. Discursive interactivity was assessed through the mapping of thread structures. Thus, these measures treated whole threads as analytical units.

Redditors' level of participation was measured using a sample that included all discussion threads that accompanied articles in the sample for representational analysis (Chapter 12).

Discursive interactivity, in turn, was analysed using a sample of 21 threads. These threads were attached to the most popular articles posted in r/politics, r/2012elections and r/politicaldiscussion, on each day of the constructed week sample used for representational analysis (Chapter 12.1; 7 days x 3 subreddits = 21 threads in total). R/republicofpolitics was not included in the sample due to its lack of comments.

(b) **Opinion presence and civility.** These characteristics were measured using quantitative content analysis, which took advantage of individual comment entries as analytical units.

The sample consisted of a corpus of 600 comments, posted in threads accompanying the 21 most popular articles in r/politics, r/2012elections and r/politicaldiscussion (see above). The sample accounts for the *breadth* as well as the *depth* of conversations. It was constructed in the following, non-random (purposive) manner.

After the top 21 articles were selected, their comment threads were displayed using Reddit's "best" sorting algorithm. This visualization ranks comments in order of their popularity: among messages that are on the same structural level of the conversation, those that received more upvotes are displayed first. From the resulting tree of messages, the first 10 top-level comments were included in the sample, as well as the first two replies for each of these comments, yielding, in ideal case, a sample of 30 items per thread. In some cases, there were fewer than 10 top-level comments, and in some cases, top-level comments received less than 2 replies.

This was done in order to get a sense of the breadth of comments, following the assumption that

new top-level comments were likely to introduce new topics, points of view, information etc. to the discussion ("new" meaning not discussed in comments before).

Next, the branches of the thread were explored in *depth*. Starting from the first top-level comment, the chain of messages was followed, and regardless of the depths it lead to, the first 20 messages thus reached were added to the sample. This was done in order to get a sense of how popular top-level comments were discussed in depth.

Due to the large number of comments that articles tend to receive especially in large subreddits, it is next to impossible to assert that such a sample would be representative of their totality in any meaningful sense.

But the sample does propose to be representative of *popular* comments - as voted for by redditors. As comments tend to be short - ranging on average from a couple of words to a couple of paragraphs at most -, the sample is assumed to provide an overview of what a reader of the discussion thread might be exposed to, provided that they spend 10-15 minutes browsing the comments using Reddit's "best" visualization setting. This setting is also the default one, indicating that most redditors use it when they browse the site. (See Chapter 11.4. on personalization and visualization settings.)

**(c) Reasoned argumentation and truthfulness.** These characteristics were measured through the qualitative analysis of the same corpus as above, comprising 600 individual messages posted in 21 threads. But this time the individual comments were not analysed in separation. Instead, each of the 21 constitutive threads was treated as a single body of text. This hermeneutic approach was necessary to take, due to the fragmented nature of discussion. Individual comments are often brief and highly dependent on the context of other messages. In isolation, they proved reliable sources of data concerning the perceived voting preference and civility of redditors (see above), but it frequently proved impossible to tie coherent lines of argument to any single comment entry.

**(d) Reflexivity.** Finally, reflexivity in conversation was assessed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Both measures used the same sample, consisting of the corpus of 600 comments posted in 21 threads, as described above. In the qualitative approach, whole threads themselves were treated as analytical units, while the quantitative approach treated individual entries as analytical units.

\* \* \*

### 13.2. Level of participation

A simple measure of redditors' willingness to participate in on-site discussions is the number of comments to popular articles. Using a sample of the most popular items in each analysed subreddit, I calculated the average number of comments, and, making the counterfactual assumption that every comment was posted by a different user, I expressed the average number of comments as a percentage of the total number of subscribers.

	Subscribers (n)*	Average number of comments	Average number of comments as % of subscribers
<b>r/politics</b>	2 203 289	M = 1452.17, SD = 2390.7	0.065
<b>r/2012elections</b>	6 634	M = 4.86, SD = 6.8	0.073
<b>r/politicaldiscussion</b>	19 882	M = 158.69, SD = 364.5	0.798
<b>r/republicofpolitics</b>	2 370	M = 1.2, SD = 1.6	0.050

\*: at the time of data collection - October 2012

Table 26. Average number of comments, also expressed as percentage of subscribers in various subreddits

According to these figures, **only a relatively small part of the audience** - in the case of r/politics, less than 0.1 % - **comments on any given article**. Given the size of certain subreddits, a relatively inactive audience might still produce sizeable bodies of text - in the case of r/politics, 1452 comments on average -, which constitute significant expansion of starting articles. Nevertheless, activism in the form of commenting seems a privilege of minorities - even if those minorities mean, in absolute terms, large groups of users.

Surprisingly, **redditors in smaller subreddits only seem marginally more active** than those in r/politics. R/politicaldiscussion is a subreddit dedicated to conversation, where starting posts are often direct questions addressed at the audience; but even there, any given discussion thread only involves the contribution of a mere 0.8% of the subreddit's audience.

I find this surprising because subscribers to small, non-default subreddits are expected to have an above average interest in their chosen topic. Those frequenting r/2012elections, r/politicaldiscussion and r/republicofpolitics are assumed to have an above average interest in electoral politics in the US. Yet that specific interest did not correlate with increased participatory activism.

To put the figures above into context, it's important to consider the possibility that different members of the audience might contribute to different discussion threads within the same subreddit. Thus, it may be that only about 1% of users comment on any given article, but it's always a slightly different group commenting on different articles, meaning that the total share of active audience members is actually higher than 1%.

On the other hand, the metric above assumes that every comment was submitted by a different individual redditor, thus possibly skewing the results in the opposite direction - suggesting higher-than-actual levels of activism.

To clarify these contextual factors, I analysed the distribution of comments per unique redditors on a sample of 600 comments. In this sample, r/republicofpolitics was ignored due to a shortage of comments (a grand total of 6 comment entries in the whole sample).

	Number of comments	Number of commenters*	Average nr. of comments per unique commenter	Nr. of commenters contributing to multiple threads
<b>r/politics</b>	315	285	M = 1.10, SD = 0.44, mode: 1	4
<b>r/2012elections</b>	61	47	M = 1.30, SD = 0.61, mode: 1	4
<b>r/politicaldiscussion</b>	224	146	M = 1.53, SD = 1.14, mode: 1	8
<b>Total sample**</b>	600	472***	M = 1.27, SD = 0.77, mode: 1	20***

\*: deleted users are assumed unique

\*\*: excluding r/republicofpolitics

\*\*\*: these figures indicate an overlap between subreddits: 6 redditors contributed to more than 1 subreddit

Table 27. Distribution of comments per unique user

The figures above suggest that the comments we see on Reddit are the work of a **very long tail**: most users really only contribute with a single comment - if they contribute at all. In addition, figures above also seem to confirm that there is little overlap between popular commenters on different threads, i.e. few such redditors emerge who consistently contribute to multiple different articles with popular comments. The overlap is largest, and users seemed most active otherwise, in r/politicaldiscussion - which is not surprising, considering that this subreddit is in fact dedicated to discussion via comments.

Thus the evidence seems to suggest that only a small minority of redditors actually contribute to the discussions in Reddit's politically constitutive subreddits; and those who do contribute tend to do it sporadically. One explanation for these results is that voting provides a less demanding, more efficient, and safer outlet for activism (Chapter 11.4.2/d).

Reddit's vote fuzzing mechanism conceals the number of up- and downvotes cast on comments, and neither is it possible to know how votes are distributed among redditors. But as comment scores always accurately represent the difference between up- and downvotes, they can be used to establish a minimum number of votes that a comment must have received<sup>98</sup>. With this in mind, I took a sample of discussion threads, and compared the minimum number of votes that the first 3

98 E.g. a comment with a score of 20 must have received at least 20 upvotes. It could have received a much larger number too - say, 1000 upvotes and 980 downvotes -, but not less than 20. Similarly, a comment with a score of -3 must have received at least 3 downvotes, meaning at least 3 different users have voted on it.



top-level comments<sup>99</sup> received with the total number of comments in each thread.

R/republicofpolitics was once again excluded due to a lack of content.

	Average of <b>votes</b> for the first 3 top-level comment <b>per comment</b> (using the whole thread as a basis)
<b>r/politics</b>	M = 1.04, SD = 0.51
<b>r/2012elections</b>	M = 1.44, SD = 1.14
<b>r/politicaldiscussion</b>	M = 0.75, SD = 0.55

Table 28. Average number of votes per comment

In plain English: the first 3 comments in threads of r/politics tended to receive at the very least 1.04 times as many votes as there were comments *in the entire discussion thread*. Even in the most conversation-oriented subreddit, r/politicaldiscussion, the top 5 (as opposed to top 3) comments tended to receive votes that easily outnumbered the total number of comments. This demonstrates that **voting** is indeed, clearly, and by a large margin, **the preferred way to get actively engaged** with the contents of Reddit.

However, two important outliers need to be mentioned.

On the day of the second televised debate of the presidential candidates (16 October 2012), two self posts were submitted to the site, one to r/politics, one to r/politicaldiscussion, with the aim of creating threads for the live discussion of the event. The one in r/politics attracted 14016 comments (z score = 5.25 - off-the-charts above the average), the one in r/politicaldiscussion 2192 (z score = 5.57), demonstrating the potential of both subreddits' audiences to become more active under special circumstances. Left at their own devices, most members of the audience showed low willingness to interact with one another directly, constituting what Habermas refers to as "abstract publics" (Habermas 2004, p.374). But these examples suggest that Reddit can also become a platform to organize such abstract publics so that they attain higher levels of interaction - turning into "occasional" publics (ibid), with focussed attention on a particular event.

Could such levels of activism be considered sufficient?

I believe so. It is true that the **level of *discursive* participation could certainly be higher** - i.e. that everybody would, in all likelihood, benefit if more than 1% of redditors contributed to discussions with comments. This would certainly increase the pool of available views and information. On the other hand, even relatively low levels of activism resulted in massive walls of text, expanding on articles at great length, where familiarizing oneself with what every participant in the discussion

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<sup>99</sup> When visualised using Reddit's "best" comment sorting method.

contributed takes copious amounts of time. This is especially true in the case of r/politics. It is thus **not surprising that most of those who take part in conversations do so by voting** on others' contributions. As suggested earlier, voting is a blunt, inarticulate expression of opinion, but what it lacks in sophistication, it makes up for in efficiency; and this efficiency is much needed in order to make sure that subsequent readers are able to find comments truly worthy of attention.

\* \* \*

### 13.3. Discursive interactivity

Discursive interactivity measures the extent to which redditors take into consideration one another's messages in a discussion, as indicated by the presence of *replies* to other messages. It does so by calculating the average depth of conversation threads, i.e. the average length of chains of replies in a sample of messages collected from various threads. Results are as follows - once again, r/republicofpolitics is ignored due to a lack of comments to analyse.

Subreddit (n: number of messages in sampled thread slices*)	AVERAGE DEPTH
r/politics (n = 1949)	3.79 (SD = 0.57)
r/2012elections (n = 76)	1.91 (SD = 0.94)
r/politicaldiscussion (n = 575)	3.04 (SD = 0.98)
Total sample** (n = 2600)	2.91 (SD = 1.15)

\*: including all replies to each 2<sup>nd</sup> top-level comment in a sample of threads (13.1/a), as well as at most 100 replies to each 1<sup>st</sup> top-level comment, when sorted using Reddit's "best" sorting algorithm

\*\*: excluding r/republicofpolitics

Table 29. Average depth of conversations in various subreddits

According to Rafaeli's definition, interactivity requires at least 3 conversational turns. This is realized in the case of r/politics and r/politicaldiscussion.

As shown earlier, only a tiny fraction of **r/politics'** audience tended to contribute to the discussion, but since the audience is so huge, the work of this active minority tended to result in a large number of comments. And it seemed that contributors also did listen to one another, developing relatively long chains of replies. This is an **acceptable** result - although it has to be noted that sampling focused on the "head" of discussion threads, oblivious to what kind of conversation was going on in less visible, less frequented parts. What is sure is that r/politics was home to genuine discussions, where participants frequently entered into dialogue with one another.

To a lesser extent, this applies to **r/politicaldiscussion** too: there are fewer comments here, and shorter reply chains, just above the magic number of 3. In practice, this suggests that typical top-

level comments received one reply (perhaps a request of clarification, or a counterargument), and the reply got replied to as well - but the conversation didn't evolve beyond that. At any rate, this satisfies the formal criterion of interactivity; and it indicates a general willingness from dwellers of this subreddit to engage in dialogue with one another.

Finally, in **r/2012elections**, even fewer comments created even shorter chains of replies: those few who did contribute to discussions here preferred not to enter into deep dialogue with one another. This subreddit **failed to realize** acceptable levels of discursive interactivity. This is not surprising, given its size, and the generally low level of activity it exhibited.

\* \* \*

### 13.4. Opinion presence and diversity

#### 13.4.1. Ideological diversity

Opinion presence and diversity in discussion threads was measured using a sample of 600 comments, posted in 21 threads in 3 subreddits (see 13.1). Each item was individually associated with an agent - the author of the comment. Coders evaluated the perceived voting preference of authors. Inter-coder reliability was established using a subset of the total sample ( $n = 257$ )<sup>100</sup> which was coded by two coders. Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  was calculated at 0.719. This suggests that findings are definitely acceptable for tentative conclusions, but to be handled with care.

The modest reliability of findings is not surprising, given the characteristics of the data analysed: comments are brief, fragmented, informally written bits of text that often lack any clear and coherent structure or argument, making it difficult to make inferences regarding their authors' views. Accordingly, coders were instructed to tread with extra caution, and to make sure to only accept such comments as valid expressions of political opinion which left virtually no doubt about this being the case. Consequently, the perceived *impartiality* of comments often stems from their being *ambiguous*: not representing any clear voting preference. The term “impartiality” has positive connotations - these should be bracketed for the interpretation of this measure.

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<sup>100</sup> 15 randomly selected discussion threads were included in the subset of the sample; these threads happened to contain 257 comments.

	Democrat	Republican	Third party	Uncertain / impartial	Total
<b>r/politics (n = 315)</b>	48.89	2.86	7.30	40.95	100
<b>r/2012elections (n = 61)</b>	36.06	3.28	6.56	54.10	100
<b>r/politicaldiscussion (n = 224)</b>	19.20	5.35	22.77	52.68	100
<b>Total sample* (n = 600)</b>	36.50	3.83	13.00	46.67	100

\*:excluding r/republicofpolitics

Table 30. Perceived voting preference of comment authors in various subreddits (%)

The largest of subreddits, **r/politics** was characterised by serious and virtually unchallenged **Democratic dominance**. By this metric, this subreddit approximates an echo chamber, rather than a forum where everyone - regardless of their views - would have the chance to express their opinions. These figures also confirm the liberal bias of r/politics, as shown by the articles published therein (Chapter 12.6.1).

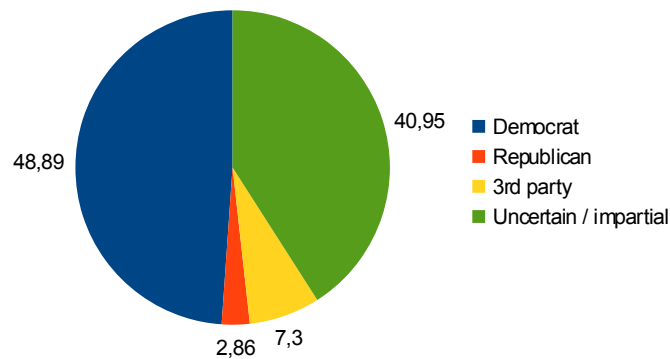


Figure 21. Commenters' voting preference in **r/politics** (n = 315), %

In **r/2012elections**, supporters of the Democratic party also outweighed other parties' sympathisers, but the most dominant feature of the subreddit was the presence of impartial - or ambiguous - comments. Although the subreddit encourages openness and tolerance, conservative commenters were practically absent.

Finally, in **r/politicaldiscussion**, 3<sup>rd</sup> party supporters - or those who'd most like to see the electoral regime changed - were on par with Democrats, and this subreddit also showed increased, albeit still low, tolerance to conservative views. This subreddit, a self-professed "high quality alternative" to r/politics did indeed seem to produce more democratic talk - with regard to the opinions represented in the discussion among redditors.

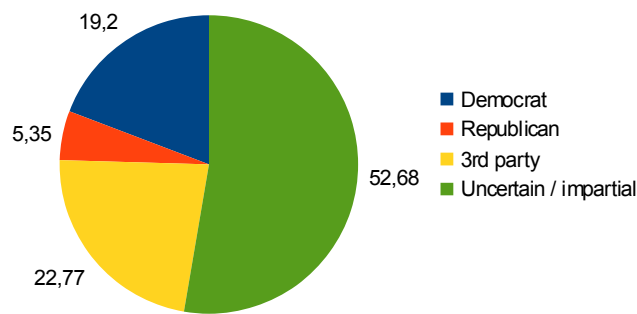


Figure 22. Commenters' voting preference in *r/politicaldiscussion* (n = 224), %

When considering the *causes* for the slant of r/politics and r/2012elections, two plausible reasons present themselves. For one, it might be that audiences of these subreddits are ideologically homogeneous; and for two, it might be that, *in spite of the heterogeneity* of audiences, supporters of one side - who happen to be the minority - are systematically excluded from being able to represent their opinions. In order to explore these reasons, I also analysed the *least popular* comments in the same discussion threads.

	Democrat	Republican	Third party	Uncertain / impartial	Total
<b>r/politics (n = 150)</b>	32.00	34.67	3.33	30.00	100
<b>r/2012elections (n = 0)</b>	-	-	-	-	-
<b>r/politicaldiscussion (n = 87)</b>	36.78	6.89	8.06	48.27	100
<b>Total sample* (n = 237)</b>	33.76	24.47	5.06	36.71	100

\*:excluding r/republicofpolitics

Table 31. Perceived voting preference of authors of unpopular comments (%)

The most immediately striking line in the table above is that belonging to r/2012elections. This indicates that *the sample of unpopular comments showed a complete overlap with that of popular ones*. Unpopular samples were gathered by sorting comments in reverse order of their popularity, and in order of how controversial they were judged by Reddit on the basis of the received up- and downvotes; but r/2012elections included so few comments that rearranging the threads in this way lead to the exact same sample. What this suggests is that there were few active members of r/2012elections, and *negligibly* few active members who supported the Republican party.

Conversely, figures above reveal that conservative redditors *did* very much frequent r/politics. This is also apparent in the example of the most popular article in r/politics posted on 3 September, 2012. The item in question was a self post, with the long title of

"I think it's pretty clear Reddit won't vote for Romney and Ryan. Instead of beating a dead horse, why don't we start looking into corrupt politics in the congress, which is where the real power is?"<sup>101</sup>

Downvoted replies to this post include "Who says we won't vote for them? I sure am," "I'm voting for Romney! I'm sick of seeing Obama turn our nation into a 3rd world country!!," "Based on the up/down votes on this thread, it's pretty indecisive who "Reddit" will vote for. Romney is a far lesser evil than Obama imo. And unfettered Ryan is what America needs," and "I don't know why you generalize reddit. I am voting for Romney, and I know that this will probably get downvoted." Such replies were acknowledged by the submitter of the item as well, who changed its contents:

"EDIT: please accept my apology. I apologize for presuming your vote."

But if supporters of the GOP were present among ranks of the audience of r/politics, their contributions were just not very visible as they were systematically downvoted by their fellow redditors.

In contrast, the table above testifies of r/politicaldiscussion's heterogeneous, or perhaps simply more tolerant audience. In this latter subreddit, conservative views were not immediately downvoted en masse.

#### **13.4.2. Promoting and enabling political activism**

Taking the sample identified above, the perceived stance of each comment's author on political activism was measured using two sets of binary variables - as in the analysis of Reddit's contents, Chapter 12.6.2. Reliability was measured using a sub-sample of 86 items in 7 randomly selected threads, and found acceptable in the case of *promoting* political activism (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 0.756$ ). In the case of *enabling* or facilitating activism,  $\alpha = 0.663$  was found, short of what Krippendorff suggests as acceptable (0.667). Since this result is ostensibly tied to the highly homogeneous nature of the source data (i.e. hardly any of the comments contained any kind of activism-*enabling* information), I assert that the following figures are at least tentatively acceptable.

In r/2012elections, not a single comment was identified as either promoting or enabling political activism. As for the other two subreddits (r/republicofpolitics was once again ignored due to the lack of comments), results are as follows:

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101 [http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/za524/i\\_think\\_its\\_pretty\\_clear\\_reddit\\_wont\\_vote\\_for/](http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/za524/i_think_its_pretty_clear_reddit_wont_vote_for/)

		<b>Campaigning and financial support</b>	<b>Voting or conscious abstinence</b>	<b>Other, nonviolent action</b>	<b>Violent action</b>	<b>Total</b>
Promoting	r/politics (n = 315)	1	4	5	3	13 (4.13%)
	r/politicaldiscussion (n = 224)	1	5	15	1	22 (9.82%)
Enabling	r/politics (n = 315)	0	1	2	0	3 (0.95%)
	r/politicaldiscussion (n = 224)	0	0	0	0	0

*Table 32. Number (and share) of comments promoting and enabling various kinds of political activism*

Thus, political participation did not emerge in conversations as an especially important or valuable activity. However, one conceivable factor in this result might be the fact that redditors already took the importance of participation for granted, and simply didn't feel the need to make this explicit, or to post seemingly trivial information that would have enabled others to participate. This is plausible, at least in the case of smaller subreddits. Subscribing to these small, politically oriented, non-default subreddits already indicates an above average level of interest in politics.

#### **13.4.3. Summary: partisan discussions**

With regard to the expressed ideological heterogeneity of redditors, the analysis of discussions confirmed findings regarding the representative analytical dimension: that r/politics is characterized by virtually unchallenged domination by Democratic party supporters; that conservative views are equally absent from r/2012elections; and that r/politicaldiscussion exhibited the highest level of tolerance to a diversity of views. With the exception of this latter subreddit, the performance of constitutive sections of Reddit cannot be accepted as adequate.

Although there are important differences between subreddits, in general it can also be asserted that **discussions on Reddit did not encourage or facilitate political participation.**

That this might be otherwise would have been especially important for r/politics: a large subreddit available to non-registered members of the site as well as redditors who have not expressed a special interest toward politics as a topic (unlike subscribers to small, specialized subreddits). But in this subreddit, only a small fraction of comments promoted participation explicitly, and an even smaller fraction facilitated it by publishing information that would have enabled participation. Still, r/politics performed better than r/2012elections, where not a single message was coded as supportive of, or facilitating, political activism.

Finally, r/politicaldiscussion performed best, with a tangible minority (roughly 10%) of messages explicitly promoting taking various kinds of action - mostly to the effect of altering the electoral

regime, or helping 3<sup>rd</sup> party candidates. At the same time, although conversations did explore various arguments as to why more involvement and a changing of the election regime would be beneficial, they could not act as resources that would have enabled redditors to *actually do anything*. They did not provide readers with practical information as to how any kind of political participation would be possible to carry out.

\* \* \*

### 13.5. Civility in discussions

Each comment in the sample was coded for the presence of uncivil claims: verbalized threats, ad hominem attacks and discrimination. Inter-coder reliability, measured on a random sub-sample of 122 items in 6 threads, was found acceptable for tentative conclusions (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 0.702$ ).

Subreddit	Civil	Verbalized threat	Ad hominem attack	Discrimination	Total
r/politics (n = 315)	85.40	0.95	13.02	0.63	100.0
r/2012elections (n = 61)	95.54	0	3.57	0.89	100.0
r/politicaldiscussion (n = 224)	88.52	0	11.48	0	100.0
Total sample (n = 600)	89.05	0.50	9.34	0.66	100.0

Table 33. Share of civil and uncivil comments in discussions (%)

Discussions in all 3 analysed subreddits were **overwhelmingly civil**, almost completely avoiding verbalized threats and discrimination. Ad hominem attacks did not exactly abound either, but were easier to find. A typical example:

"That's fair. But the reason that Obama had so much support was that he was the anti-George W. Bush. [...] He was intelligent, rational, and wasn't going to be *a complete monster* like GW Bush<sup>102</sup>."

Although the targets of ad hominem attacks were not studied in specific detail, the findings gave the impression that in most cases, they were directed at public persons - politicians -, or parties in general, but rarely at one's conversational partners. This is an ambiguous observation: on the one hand, it could be the result of especially civil communication among redditors, moderators doing their job well, or of the fact that redditors with conflicting views did not talk with one another (see 13.4.1. and 13.7). Whether redditors would remain civil in the presence of more disagreement is questionable. Subsequent studies, in controlled environments, could pursue this line of enquiry.

<sup>102</sup> [http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11b4qv/how\\_do\\_you\\_defend\\_obama\\_aggressively\\_going\\_after/c6kxa05](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11b4qv/how_do_you_defend_obama_aggressively_going_after/c6kxa05)



### 13.6. Reasoned argumentation in discussions

The presence of reasoned arguments in discussion was ascertained by the qualitative analysis of a sample of threads, treated as coherent bodies of text. Arguments did emerge, but the argument-to-comment ratio tended to be low: 7% in r/politics, 17% in smaller subreddits. However, these figures refer to *distinct* lines of argument, thus they don't necessarily indicate that the overwhelming majority didn't contribute to the discussion at all. Instead, they suggest that the number of comments introducing new, distinct arguments was low.

Subreddit (n = number of comments in a sample of threads)	Avg. number of distinct arguments per thread	Ratio of arguments to comments (%)
r/politics (n = 315)	3.28 (SD = 1.57)	7.30
r/2012elections (n = 61)	1.57 (SD = 1.17)	18.03
r/politicaldiscussion (n = 224)	5.14 (SD = 2.42)	16.07
Total sample (n = 600)	3.33 (SD = 2.32)	11.67

Table 34. Arguments emerging from discussions

Unsurprisingly, recurring arguments in r/politics accused the GOP, or Romney in particular, of cheating; somewhat more surprisingly, some redditors also proposed the reform of the voting system, so as to give third parties a better chance. This latter development is surprising given the overall low support that commenters in r/politics provided for alternative parties (see 13.4.1). Notable arguments put forward in r/politicaldiscussion included assertions that third parties would be a better solution because of the questionable economic policy of both major candidates; and their apparent similarity in important issues (regarding e.g. civil liberties). As in r/politics, another recurring claim was that "money should be taken out of elections," and the electoral system should be reformed to the benefit of third parties.

Meanwhile, arguments in r/2012elections tended to focus on the (negative) personal characteristics of politicians, predominantly of Romney ("rich," "smug" and "out of touch") and Ryan ("a liar").

Overall, I contend that conversations in constitutive sections of Reddit **performed reasonably well**, when it comes to the measure of reasoned argumentation. The analysis revealed that, on average, 3 - 5 distinct lines of argument surface in every discussion thread (except in r/2012election, where comments were scarce). This obviously exceeds the number of arguments found in a typical article (1.4, on average) - i.e. **discussions did tend to build on and expand articles** that served as their starting point. The low argument-to-comment ratio suggests that it might take quite some time to find the arguments, as they slowly develop through conversation, accompanied by a lot of repetition as well as irrelevant chatter. But if one was willing to invest some attention in wading through

comments, there was something to be learned from other redditors.

These discussions might not pass the test of formal deliberation, expected from institutions of the political core. But on the political periphery of unorganized and un-institutionalized flows of communication, it would be unrealistic to expect much higher levels of argumentativeness.

However, the comprehensive evaluation of the deliberativeness of discussions must include the analysis of the truthfulness of arguments, as well as their reflexivity. These sections follow.

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### 13.7. Reflexivity of discussions

Reflexivity in redditors' conversations is analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. In the former approach, I took advantage of the measure of opinion presence and diversity (Chapter 13.4), and looked for contrary replies. (A reminder: messages in a thread are classified either as *comments*, in which case they reply to the starting post, or *replies*, meaning that they reply to a *comment*.) Results are as follows.

Subreddit (n = number of comments in a sample of threads)	Number of <i>replies</i>	Number of contrary <i>replies</i>	Ratio of contrary vs. neutral/friendly replies (%)
r/politics (n = 315)	246	7	2.85
r/2012elections (n = 61)	33	1	3.03
r/politicaldiscussion (n = 224)	153	18	11.76
Total (n = 600)	432	26	6.01

Table 35. Friendly and contrary replies in discussions

Thus, the ratio of contradicting to non-contradicting replies tended to be quite low, suggesting that redditors of diverging ideological beliefs tended not to engage in dialogue with one another.

Unsurprisingly, the ratio was highest in the case of r/politicaldiscussion, but on the basis of this figure, discussions tended to fall short of the deliberative ideal even in this subreddit. The figure above indicates that one in ten replies contradicts the message it replies to. But procedurally correct deliberation would require that every single claim is questioned. In the informal, public deliberation conducted on Reddit, one could argue for laxer rules to apply; and we should always entertain the possibility that redditors who think largely along the same lines in terms of their preferred political ideology are also capable of questioning their own ideas. (Just because one thinks Obamacare is a good thing should not mean that one is incapable of seeing its potential disadvantages or flaws.) But seeing liberals, conservatives and those supporting alternative approaches to politics engage in discussion with one another would help assure that ideas are put to the test, and critically engaged

with. The numbers above suggest that this does not happen very often on Reddit.

The analysis of arguments emerging from discussion provides confirmatory evidence.

On the basis of qualitative interpretation of arguments that emerged from discussion, each argument was categorized as SIMPLE, HALF-CONSIDERED or CONSIDERED, depending on the extent to which it was explored and critically engaged with.

Discussions about an article published on 1 September in r/politics<sup>103</sup> are an ample source of SIMPLE arguments. Reflecting on a segment in the Daily Show, commenters claimed, for instance, that "a free market can only be maintained by a strong government," suggesting that the libertarians got this one wrong. But no evidence of any kind was offered for the claim, and no counterarguments were considered.

An interesting example of a HALF-CONSIDERED argument was put forward in another thread<sup>104</sup>. The claim was made that Romney is a "man without a core; a man who will say anything to become president." But some redditors pointed out that this claim, while true, might apply to *all politicians*, including Obama. Thus the validity of the argument was questioned: is this really a reason not to vote for Romney...? But the question was not explored further.

In yet another thread<sup>105</sup>, the claim was made that "both sides [i.e. the Republicans and the Democrats] are playing the public," and thus the best solution would be to look for some third alternative. This argument became CONSIDERED, as redditors questioned its validity (perhaps both sides are "playing the public," but does it mean they are equally bad?), and raised questions about whether voting third party would really be a solution in the current political reality.

A reasonable interpretation of deliberativeness would require that every line of argument that surfaces is at least HALF-CONSIDERED: not necessarily explored from every angle, but at least *questioned* or tentatively investigated, so as to enable further enquiry and discussion.

In order to quantify results, I calculated the ratio of CONSIDERED arguments, by using a simple scheme of counting a HALF-CONSIDERED argument as "half a CONSIDERED one." Thus, in this scheme, a ratio of 50% would indicate that all arguments in a thread are HALF-CONSIDERED, or that half of every argument made are CONSIDERED; or some combination of these two. Results follow:

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103 [http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/z6frk/the\\_daily\\_show\\_shows\\_what\\_should\\_happen\\_to\\_some/](http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/z6frk/the_daily_show_shows_what_should_happen_to_some/)

104 [http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/11kdw9/this\\_is\\_a\\_man\\_without\\_a\\_core\\_this\\_is\\_a\\_man/](http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/11kdw9/this_is_a_man_without_a_core_this_is_a_man/)

105 [http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/za524/i\\_think\\_its\\_pretty\\_clear\\_reddit\\_wont\\_vote\\_for/](http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/za524/i_think_its_pretty_clear_reddit_wont_vote_for/)

Subreddit (n = number of comments in a sample of threads)	Avg. number of distinct arguments per thread	Avg. number of CONSIDERED arguments per thread	Ratio of CONSIDERED arguments to all arguments (%)
r/politics (n = 315)	3.28 (SD = 1.57)	1.07 (SD = 1.02)	32.60
r/2012elections (n = 61)	1.57 (SD = 1.17)	0.29 (SD = 0.36)	18.18
r/politicaldiscussion (n = 224)	5.14 (SD = 2.42)	2.14 (SD = 1.16)	41.67
Total sample (n = 600)	3.33 (SD = 2.32)	1.16 (SD = 1.19)	35.00

Table 36. Considered arguments emerging from discussions

The most revealing column in the table above is the rightmost one. It shows that in r/politicaldiscussion, about 40% of arguments were found CONSIDERED: a figure that falls short of the 50% ratio that deliberation would require. R/2012elections did much worse: not only did this subreddit include fewer arguments, they also tended to remain unexplored. And r/politics emerged as a subreddit where reading through the head of a discussion thread would help users familiarize with a single line of CONSIDERED argument. (In such a large subreddit, where comments tend to turn up in thousands, reading through every single comment and reply might help readers find more CONSIDERED opinions, but doing so would require a disproportionately and unacceptably large investment in time and attention.)

In sum, both qualitative and the quantitative measures indicate **insufficient reflexivity** to have been exhibited by discussion threads, where r/politicaldiscussion did come close to the deliberative minimum, but never quite managed to reach it.

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### 13.8. Truthfulness of discussions

The truthfulness of redditors' comments was analysed from two perspectives. First I asked whether these user-generated contributions helped correct less-than-truthful articles - this would be a welcome development for all models of democracy concerned. Then, specifically from the deliberative perspective, I examined whether the arguments that emerged from discussion were based on truthful claims. Deliberation would require the presence of such arguments (but not the total absence of arguments based on falsehoods - these latter are important stepping stones toward good solutions).

#### 13.8.1. Comments correcting articles?

R/republicofpolitics could not be analysed in this perspective, due to a lack of comments.

(a) In **r/politics**, three articles were declared squarely untruthful (see Chapter 12.5). In one case,

redditors' comments did offer corrective information, and these comments were also relatively visible - among the first 10 top-level comments, when viewed using Reddit's "best" comment sorting algorithm. The article suggested that Romney's former company was "controlling" another organization, manufacturing and owning voting machines, but, as redditors pointed out:

"I did some more independent research on these claims and it seems they're completely fictitious. Mitt Romney left Bain & Company and formed his own company called Bain Capital. [...] People have completely mixed up Bain & Company with Bain Capital<sup>106</sup>", and

"This is a stretch. Title is entirely misleading. Hart is not "controlled by" Bain capital. Some of the management worked there at some point.<sup>107</sup>"

However, none of the corrective claims cited external sources that could have backed up their claims as evidence.

In another case, regarding an article that accused the GOP of inadvertently revealing classified information about the CIA, a corrective was offered, citing evidence:

"Pathetic attempt to distract from the real scandal. Nothing was blown. [...] The fact the CIA operated out of [Benghazi, Libya] has already been reported on. This is from September 25...  
<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article3548323.ece><sup>108</sup>"

But the comment was not very visible at all: when looking at the comments using Reddit's default "best" sorting option, this entry, only the 13<sup>th</sup> ranked top-level comment, was buried under heaps of Republican-bashing.

Finally, in the case of the third untruthful article, no corrective information was posted among the most visible comments, although some, heavily downvoted, redditors did point out that the article was putting forward a dubious conspiracy theory.

In the cases of factually truthful articles which failed to tell the whole story, unfailingly, there were some redditors who did attempt to point out the problems with such articles (e.g. "I'm sure AlterNet is completely objective about this<sup>109</sup>"). And, unfailingly - their comments got downvoted. Those readers who only browsed through the most popular comments were unlikely to meet any such critical objections. I contend that this fact was related to the fact that factually correct but incomplete articles tended to present arguments against the Republican party: liberal-minded

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106 [http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/119j5s/corruption\\_baincontrolled\\_company\\_owns\\_2012/c6koc4k](http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/119j5s/corruption_baincontrolled_company_owns_2012/c6koc4k)

107 [http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/119j5s/corruption\\_baincontrolled\\_company\\_owns\\_2012/c6km80t](http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/119j5s/corruption_baincontrolled_company_owns_2012/c6km80t)

108 [http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/11afat/house\\_republicans\\_aiming\\_for\\_obama\\_blow\\_the\\_cias/c6kwgqy](http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/11afat/house_republicans_aiming_for_obama_blow_the_cias/c6kwgqy)

109 [http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/z6hq2/matt\\_taibbi\\_reveals\\_how\\_romney\\_made\\_his\\_fortune/c61xi7u](http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/z6hq2/matt_taibbi_reveals_how_romney_made_his_fortune/c61xi7u)

redditors simply downvoted comments that questioned the narrative dominating r/politics.

(b) In **r/2012elections**, 2 articles were declared squarely untruthful (Chapter 12.5). In both cases, corrective information, together with substantiating evidence, was posted among the comments. These contributions were also found among the most popular comments - although this was not difficult to achieve, given the low number of comments in general (see 13.2: on average, articles received 4.86 comments).

In this subreddit, 9 articles were identified as truthful, but slanted through omission. Generally, these attracted no corrective comments, or ones that would have questioned the bias of their sources.

Thus, in the two subreddits above, *factually incorrect* statements appeared to have a better chance to get rectified than untruthfulness realized by omission. This is undoubtedly related to the partisan predisposition of the audience of these subreddits - but also to the fact that error by omission is less blatant and harder to remedy than obvious factual errors.

(c) **R/politicaldiscussion** only yielded a single squarely untruthful article (Chapter 12.5); and in that case, corrective information was posted by multiple redditors. Corrective comments were among the most popular ones, although it's notable that the correction meant questioning an article which forecast a landslide victory for Mitt Romney. But, of course, one cannot generalize on the basis of this single example.

### 13.8.2. Truthfulness of arguments

Each line of identified argument (see 13.6), that emerged from discussions in comments, was qualitatively analysed with regard to the truthfulness of the claims that it was based on.

R/republicofpolitics was once again left out, due to a lack of comments.

(a) **R/politics**, the largest of analysed subreddits, produced two squarely and undoubtedly false lines of argument: one asserting that Romney was involved in election fraud, and another suggesting that his being a mormon somehow made him at best suspicious, at worst, evil.

But also very few - three in total - squarely and undoubtedly truthful arguments emerged. These claimed that the majority of recipients of federal aid live, ironically, in "red" (traditionally Republican) states; that the GOP would favour a Supreme Court with more conservative judges; and that calling Obama a socialist does not really make sense. In the context of the respective

articles these referred to, all of these arguments were made in support of Obama.

**Most arguments that emerged from this subreddit fell somewhere between truthful and false.**

Such debatable arguments often involved broad generalizations (e.g. "Republicans don't actually want to reduce the state"), or assertions of personal opinion ("I think that the libertarians are wrong"). Some of them were speculative: impossible to decide whether true or false, because they referenced a future or hypothetical state of things (e.g. "it would be better to have more political parties, because that would resolve the gridlock in Congress").

(b) **R/2012elections** presented a picture very similar to the one painted by r/politics: few unquestionably true or false lines of argument could be identified - instead, conversations were dominated by debatable arguments, often tied to claimants' personal opinion (e.g. "Jill Stein is likeable" or "Mitt Romney is a horrible asshat"). These are not very good arguments - not necessarily because they are not very sophisticated, but because they would be difficult to substantiate or generalize.

(c) Finally, conversations in **r/politicaldiscussion** featured ten unquestionably truthful lines of argument, asserting, for example, that chances of third parties would increase with proportional representation; that Jill Stein had no governing experience; or that Romney had plans to repeal the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), if elected.

In addition, I could not identify arguments in this subreddit which were unquestionably false.

However, just like in the other two subreddits, **conversations were dominated by arguments based on debatable claims**, tied to speculation or personal opinion. Examples include claims that Obama and Romney are "the two major clowns," that "neither of them has a good plan for solving the deficit problem," and "Romney's plans would not help unemployment<sup>110</sup>."

In sum, conversations in all subreddits featured few entirely true or false lines of argument. Instead, the majority of arguments tended to involve generalizations, appeals to personal feelings, and speculation, leading to claims that could not easily be declared true or false in a definitive manner. The presence of such arguments is hardly surprising on an informal, public forum such as Reddit. Neither would this, per se, be a problem - if conversations *also* included truthful and forceful arguments. Deliberation, ideally, should involve both kinds. But even in the most discussion-

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<sup>110</sup> In this latter case, the argument could perhaps be modified to become true with some qualifications - e.g. that Romney's plans are *unlikely* to create new jobs, given certain factors. But the actual argument that emerged from the discussion asserted that they, simply, won't - or at best they will create new workplaces in China. ([http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/1197pk/the\\_whole\\_big\\_bird\\_argument\\_the\\_obama\\_campaign\\_is/](http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/1197pk/the_whole_big_bird_argument_the_obama_campaign_is/))

oriented subreddit (r/politicaldiscussion), debatable claims outweighed truthful ones in a ratio of two to one. This suggests that Reddit **failed to meet this important demand of deliberativeness**.

\* \* \*

### 13.9. Summary: (also) much room for improvement

The picture that emerges from the analysis of conversations on Reddit leaves a lot to be desired, although some subreddits did better in some respects than others. The analysis cast light on **low levels of discursive activity**: the overwhelming majority of those redditors who contributed to discussions did so by *voting* on others' comments, as opposed to posting a comment themselves. However, levels of **discursive interactivity** emerged as **meeting the theory-informed minimum** in the case of two out of three examined subreddits, suggesting that those redditors who do contribute to discussions tend to enter into dialogue with one another (except in r/2012elections). With regard to the presence and diversity of opinions in discussion, various *constitutive* subreddits are both like and unlike one another in certain regards. One feature shared by all of them is that they **did not encourage or facilitate** actual political **participation** - although in smaller subreddits this might be explained by the fact that redditors took the importance of such participation for granted, and considered practical information too trivial to mention.

In contrast, the three examined subreddits differed in terms of diversity of represented political ideologies. **R/politics** emerged as an **echo chamber**, with virtually unchallenged Democratic dominance - in spite of a relatively mixed audience, and conservative-leaning redditors' attempts to contribute to discussions. Such attempts tended to attract massive numbers of downvotes, and thus became practically invisible.

R/2012election also produced disappointing results, as conservative and third-party perspectives remained seriously underrepresented in discussions. This might be explained by the ideological homogeneity of the subreddit's audience.

On the other hand, **r/politicaldiscussion**'s conversations provided **grounds for optimism**, as they featured conservative and third-party points of views as well.

All examined subreddits were **overwhelmingly civil** - although this might be explained the fact that disagreement in conversations was scarce.

Finally, subreddits **failed to reach the deliberative ideal**, with regard to the argumentativeness and reflexivity of conversations. Conversations tended to yield a reasonable number of arguments regarding the problem of the election, but these arguments were not often questioned, explored and critically reflected upon. Not surprisingly, r/politicaldiscussion performed best in this regard- but its performance still fell short of reasonable minimal criteria of deliberation.



## Chapter 14. Summary: Reddit as an agent of democracy?

### 14.1. Reddit in liberal-individualist democracy

Reddit **largely failed to meet the standards of performance** derived from the liberal-individualist model of democracy. But some aspects of its performance, and some of its sections, were better than others.

Notably, the site exhibited a remarkable capacity for diversifying the public sphere by increasing the chances of smaller, alternative, non-mainstream media to compete for attention in a viable manner. However, in r/politics and r/2012elections, this diversification did not reach across the aisle, so to say, i.e. it did not manifest in anything resembling *ideological* diversity, in spite of the subreddits' explicit declaration of non-partisanship. Perhaps as a result of "herding," related to structural factors (see Chapter 11.4.2/b), these subreddits failed to realize freedom of expression in a meaningful, substantial manner. These subreddits might be invaluable resources for those who would like to explore *one side of the debate*, as they proved largely truthful (reliable). But they could not possibly act as a democratic informational resource, manifesting a substantial realization of the principle of freedom of expression, *on their own*.

This is a disappointing result, as an important potential of social news sites would be that, due to their openness and inclusive nature, they could act as one-stop-shops of political communication, where citizens could get thorough and comprehensive information about the choice they are facing at election time.

R/politicaldiscussion performed better. Its contents were ideologically more diverse, questioning the status quo, and exploring conservative positions as well as liberal ones. Moreover, its users exhibited a somewhat larger degree of activism than redditors in other subreddits. This subreddit started out with the dedicated aim of becoming an improved version of r/politics, and largely succeeded in this undertaking.

One possible factor of its success might be its **ideal size**. With around 20,000 subscribers, it is much smaller than r/politics, allowing for an increased chance of users to question any kind of dominant agenda that would emerge; but it is much larger than r/2012elections and r/republicofpolitics, suggesting that its user base might be a diverse enough source of opinions. However- this is at best a hypothesis, which could serve as basis for subsequent research.

Finally, r/republicofpolitics deserves another mention- this section was *also* launched as a subreddit to correct the perceived errs of r/politics, but, perhaps due to its minimal size (about 2,500

redditors), it failed, because it hardly attracted any submissions, and these generated hardly any discussion.

#### **14.2. Reddit in communitarian-republican democracy**

As described above, Reddit failed to substantiate the principle of free expression in all but one of the subreddits analysed (r/politicaldiscussion). This result does not bode well for the case of the communitarian model, which incorporates features of the liberal-individualist one. The analysis revealed that the site's coverage also failed to meet requirements specific to the communitarian model.

In particular, Reddit did not promote the idea of political participation either, and it did not provide its users with information that would have enabled such participation. Its coverage did overwhelmingly abide by standards of civility - but it is conceivable that the ideological homogeneity of contents played a decisive part in this. I.e. my analysis could not reveal whether norms of civility would still be respected in the hypothetical scenario where contents would be more ideologically heterogeneous, and there would be more disagreement between redditors.

In fact, the ideological coherence the site exhibited suggests that Reddit is indeed a site of community engagement, of nurturing ties that bind fellow redditors. R/politics in particular stood out as a place where they were keen to interact with one another in discussion. Structural features of the site do advocate and enable activism, too. But the communities that the site helps flourish are **communities of like-minded individuals, not inclusive communities of citizens sharing a political responsibility.**

#### **14.3. Reddit in deliberative democracy**

Reddit's election coverage also failed to satisfy requirements specific to the deliberative model. Structurally, the site has the potential to become a scene of public deliberation, in a hybrid form that would take the best of its *conversational* and *oratory* versions (Chapter 11.4.2/e), and would allow insightful comments and experts to be "crowdsourced to prominence." But in this regard the site's performance is very much contingent on that of its users, who, in the particular case of covering the 2012 presidential election, did not exactly do a very good job.

Considering solely the argumentative nature of the compilation of articles that redditors curated, and ignoring their largely partisan orientation (see 14.1), it can be asserted that they established a reasonable basis for deliberation. But this deliberation did not, in general, actually take place among redditors.

One of the sampled subreddits, r/republicofpolitics, produced precious little content, accompanied

by virtually no discussion at all. R/2012elections did better: articles did spark some commentary and discussion, but, perhaps due to the small and homogeneous audience of this subreddit, conversations tended to be way too brief and shallow to be considered deliberation.

R/politics, in contrast, hosted lengthy and deep discussions, which most often expanded on articles. But these discussions also tended to lack reflexivity: to avoid disagreement and the careful exploration of arguments.

With regard to reflexivity, r/politicaldiscussion performed best, occasionally approaching a theoretically informed minimum of deliberation, but never quite managing to reach it. Thus, the overall **deliberative potential of Reddit remained dormant**, underutilized.

## Part V. Conclusion

### Chapter 15. Verdict: mostly inadequate

In this thesis, I evaluated the performance of *constitutive* sections of Reddit, using three sets of overlapping but distinct criteria that represent three different visions of democracy. On the basis of the analysis, I contend that Reddit's structural features establish an equality of opportunity between its users, but in the case of the coverage of the 2012 US presidential election, this equality did not lead to manifest, substantial equality between redditors of different political conviction. Despite the site's attempts to promote considerate discussion and respectful, inclusive behaviour, it **failed to live up to the promise of being an open, tolerant site of information democratization**.

Thus, my study both confirms and refutes findings by Meraz (2009) - one of the few previous studies in this specific area. On the one hand, the findings illustrate how social news sites can become important players in rebalancing power relations among actors in the public sphere, given their propensity to channel attention to citizen media and alternative outlets. On the other hand, they also show that, at least in the specific case of *constitutive* sections of Reddit, this potential was *not* stifled by "an elite cadre of users" (ibid, p.140) holding disproportionate power and influence over the site's contents.

On the contrary. According to my analysis, Reddit exhibited considerable degrees of source diversity. Instead of a relatively small group of users, a large and diverse group, featuring numerous redditors, emerged as being behind popular content submissions to the site. In other words, it was the very long tail of users whose collaboration was responsible for Reddit's contents.

However, the characteristics of popular content items indicated that influential redditors tended to be similar in their preferred political ideology. Thus, high levels of *nominal* diversity (of contents, sources, and users) did not go hand in hand with high levels of *ideological* diversity. Reddit emerged as an ideologically homogeneous environment, in particular, supporting a liberal-progressive agenda.

In general, its coverage exhibited excessive partisanship, as opposed to impartiality. It was certainly civil, but not very civic-minded, in so far as it did not specifically encourage or facilitate (offline or online) political participation, or interaction across ideological positions. And it also failed to reach the deliberative ideal even at its deliberative best (in a small subreddit dedicated to political discussion).

A nuanced evaluation must take into consideration the meaningful differences between different subreddits - especially since Reddit is in all likelihood predestined to a route of increasing audience fragmentation.

If **r/politics** had performed in accordance with democratic standards, that would have been especially important, considering that this subreddit is where most redditors are exposed to any kind of political coverage at all. Unfortunately, it failed to live up to such expectations, and acted as an unofficial **anti-Romney campaign channel**.

In contrast, **r/politicaldiscussion** demonstrated the capacity of smaller subreddits to create **communities of discussion**, whose cooperation resulted in an output that approximated democratic ideals better. This subreddit differs from others not only in size, but also in its aims: it is less focused on gathering breaking news, and much more geared toward - as the name suggests - *discussions* of news, which are assumed to be already familiar to readers. It might not be the best place to gather a broad overview of the latest events; but it could aid redditors reasonably well in *interpreting* them. Such a subreddit is especially useful in the coverage of events with a largely predictable, established choreography, such as election campaigns. Unlike in a situation of crisis - e.g. a natural disaster -, being up-to-date in the coverage of such events is of lesser importance. Citizens should make up their minds about candidates on the basis of their policies, personal qualities, and relevant issues, as opposed to the latest developments in the campaign. However, discussions in this subreddit did not amount to deliberation, although they approximated it closer than conversations in any other examined subreddit. To wit, discussions in this subreddit tended to include the representation of more points of view, more arguments, and more critical engagement with arguments than those in other sections of Reddit. The performance of this subreddit in developing "a plurality of considered opinions" (Chapter 6.3) concerning the election was *better* than that of others. But when judged against the various theoretical standards, it was still inadequate: it lacked in reflexivity, i.e. in critical engagement with various positions and their respective supporting arguments.

Finally, **r/2012elections** and **r/republicofpolitics** illustrated that subreddit size and content quality are not in a simple inverse relationship with one another. R/republicofpolitics showed promising signs, but it produced hardly any output, due to the low activity of its resident redditors. In contrast, r/2012elections was dominated by supporters of the Democratic Party, just like r/politics. The analysis of unpopular comments suggests that different mechanisms are responsible for the

failure of r/politics, and that of r/2012elections. Namely, r/politics was shown to be frequented by Republican supporters too - but they, in all likelihood, constituted only a minority, and their contributions tended to be quickly downvoted to oblivion. Conversely, virtually no sign of conservative activity was discovered in r/2012elections, suggesting that the audience of this subreddit was not only much smaller than that of r/politics, but also more homogeneous.

## Chapter 16. Reflections: A necessary technological fix?

### 16.1. How Reddit could be improved

As the discussion above implied, Reddit's performance depends, broadly, on three general factors: redditors as "*producers*," who collaborate in filtering and aggregating content; the *technology* that makes the collaboration possible, and the *raw material* of previously published content that gets filtered in the collaborative work of redditors.

As for the raw material, the hands of Reddit as an organization, and redditors as users, are tied. The best Reddit can do is to enable the greatest possible degree of source diversity - which it indeed appears to be doing - and hope for the best.

As for the audience/workforce of redditors, options appear to be even fewer. As a business organization whose vested interest is in attracting as many visitors as possible, Reddit is not in the situation to be picky about its users, so far as they don't do anything illegal or overly disruptive. But even if Reddit didn't care about figures of incoming traffic, it is difficult to conceive of ways in which it could deny participatory rights to users who are found unworthy on some arbitrary criteria. Doing so would question the very premise on which the site operates - that it is an open, democratic platform. Much like democracy itself, Reddit has to acknowledge that its success depends, to a great extent, on mind-bogglingly imperfect human beings.

In dealing with this state of things, one can take one's cue from Lippmann (1993 [1927]), and assume a cynical stance, arguing that any expectation of a random bunch of people being capable of producing any kind of quality content has to ignore our fundamental psychological and epistemological limits as human beings<sup>111</sup>.

But doing so would be completely ignoring the role of technology, the "plumbing" (Musiani 2012) that allows the cooperation of that random bunch of people in the first place. Acknowledging our limits as human beings should not mean that we should give up hopes of being able to reach - if not *the best*, at least: - *better* solutions to problems of information democratization. Technology renders certain kinds of interactions likely and possible, others unlikely and impossible, and, trivially, different kinds of interaction may lead to systematically different results in output. Although we might never reach a theoretical ideal, it would be worth experimenting with technology in order to find solutions that are closer to it.

In parallel to such experimentation, Reddit could accept its own limits: that it is a haphazard and

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<sup>111</sup> Of course, Wikipedia immediately comes to mind as a glaring counterexample; but the differences between the purpose, subject material, and editorial principles of sites forbid a direct comparison between Wikipedia and Reddit.

constantly changing collection of useful as well as useless resources. Based on this recognition, the site could then play an increased role in helping its users find those bits and pieces from which they could benefit the most. Reddit filters and aggregates the web - but it could also filter and aggregate *itself* - which would be more and more needed as the site grows.

Such meta-level filtering already occurs on the site, in subreddits such as r/bestof, r/tldr, r/defaultgems and r/depthhub. These subreddits re-publish articles and comments that had previously already been submitted to Reddit, with a view to grant them a deservedly large audience. Through such recursive, meta-level filtering, insightful but overlooked contributions receive a second chance of becoming popular and visible.

So far, these subreddits tend to be run and moderated by ordinary redditors. Perhaps admins of the site could become more active in these and similar sections, in order to promote high-quality content, without compromising the site's fundamental openness and laissez-faire management style.

Doing so, however, might lead to a paradoxical situation.

Given Reddit's architecture, it seems unlikely that very strong quality control can happen in fast-growing and large subreddits, as the output of any subreddit is likely to converge to a lowest common denominator of its audience. R/politics is a case in point.

The meta-level filtering of Reddit, in turn, is likely to lead to the popularization of smaller subreddits. Such sections of the site which are put on the radar by the exceptional quality of their output are likely to grow - to attract more and more users quickly - which in turn might threaten their existing standards of quality. Thus, meta-level filtering might confine the site to perpetual EPS-cycles (Chapter 11.4.2/c): new, interesting and high-quality subreddits are found and popularized; as they grow, their quality deteriorates; until their members migrate to newer and smaller subreddits, in the hopes of making up for the perceived loss in quality.

Thankfully, Reddit is well-equipped to accommodate such cyclic developments. Redditors, on the other hand, might find it more difficult to adapt to such a situation, where standards of quality are always precarious, and where the past performance of an information source might not be an accurate indicator of its performance in the future. This would illustrate Hartley's (2008a) and Gillmor's (2009) point: that the only way audiences can take advantage of the benefits of new media would be through assuming increased responsibility, and, in general, taking a more critical stance toward mediated information.

## **16.2. Technology fixes for social problems?**

As I've indicated in the review of previous literature (Chapter 2), "technology fixes" are a popular



topic among new media scholars. Papers keep discussing not only the various ways in which technology could have beneficial effects in other social dimensions, often tied to some underlying concept of democracy, but also whether such technology fixes would be possible, or even desirable. It is not surprising that we keep asking such questions, since technology offers a way, or at least a promise, to overcome our manifold psychological, physiological, cognitive and cultural limitations. Due to all these limitations, we might be cursed with an "incompetence of democracy," (Lippmann 1993 [1927], p.16), which "eugenic[!], educational, ethical, populist and socialist" remedies are unable to cure (ibid, p.28). But technology seems to have a great track record in rendering us capable of transgressing boundaries drawn by our physical and intellectual capacities. Consider, for instance, Carey's famous tenet regarding the way in which the telegraph was "a watershed in communication" (1989, p.203), separating *communication* from *transportation* and thereby enabling immediate contact between people separated by great distances. And, with a more recent example, computers' sheer power has revolutionized our ways to gather, organize, store, and retrieve information. Technology enables us to act in ways that would be completely beyond our reach without it - and thus it holds the tantalizing promise that it might also help us achieve better forms of social organization. Moreover, technology might also appear as our last and only hope for doing so: if technology cannot help us at least approximate ideal circumstances that democracy requires - then what else can?

Of course it would be a mistake to regard technology as some kind of *deus ex machina*, or a force that is independent of particular human interests, or one that we are fully in control of (Feenberg 2010, pp.47–61). Authors such as Hindman (2009) and Morozov (2011) have poignantly shown how a utopian, uncritically optimistic view in the democratizing power of technology can lead to the creation of new inequalities and oppression. And this study itself is an illustration of the rift between *formal* and *substantial* democratization via new media. But a belief in the power of technological fixes need not be uncritical. I don't think it's impossible to acknowledge the limits of technology, while at the same time attempting to expand them. We do not have to settle for a draw. Perhaps, as Peters suggests, "all communication via media" will always remain "ultimately indistinguishable from communication with the dead" (2000, p.176). But this doesn't mean that all communication would be, from an external, normative perspective, equal, or that we should give up trying to find ways to improve the circumstances under which communication takes place. Just as democracy is "the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time" (Churchill 1947), technological fixes to social problems might represent the worst kind of fixes - except for all those other ones.

## Chapter 17. Limitations

This study is limited in a number of important ways.

(a) **Reddit is a moving target.** It is an evolving organisation that keeps adding new features to the site, as well as removing and changing existing ones. For example, a recent new feature I could not account for is that of "multireddits:" a user interface feature that enables redditors to browse between groups of subreddits (as opposed to individual ones). More importantly, at the time of data collection, r/politics was one of the default subreddits - it no longer is -, and in April 2013, a new feature was introduced, whereby moderators can have Reddit hide comment scores for some time after they were posted, so as to prevent herding (voting solely on the basis of how others have voted before).

In addition, audiences tend to change, too; certainly in numbers, but perhaps also in demographics. My study describes Reddit as it existed and performed in the autumn of 2012. The site's current and future performance might differ, suggesting that this study is best used as a baseline, or a point of orientation, for subsequent research.

(b) Related to (a), the **specificity of the case** also questions the generalizability of findings to non-US contexts. Naturally, many different social news sites exist, and some of them target a non-US audience. In addition, Reddit itself is used by visitors from all over the world, with several subreddits dedicated to non-US politics. But an analytical framework that adapts to the peculiarities of the US electoral system might not be usable elsewhere.

(c) This study evaluates **output and actual performance**. Although it considers potential reasons behind actual results, it does not explore them in detail. It proposes to offer a sound description of Reddit's performance, but it can only go so far as to stating plausible hypotheses concerning what could explain this performance.

(d) Finally, although I don't believe that the **relatively small sample** size imposes a serious limitation on the study, there are some considerations I need to address about it. The problem of sample is relevant on three different levels in this study: in the selection of subreddits, in the selection of articles within the chosen subreddits, and in the selections of comments concerning items published there.

As for the first level, it is true that Reddit consists of several tens of thousands of independent but related sections (subreddits); and I only analysed four of these, with one of these contributing practically nothing in terms of source material. But my analysis and argument do not depend on just

how representative the four subreddits are *of Reddit as such*. I am not interested in the performance of Reddit as such - only of its *constitutive* sections.

Finding the full set or a representative sample of these constitutive sections would be arduous, due to a lack of a systematic directory of information about various subreddits. Reddit models the web; and just as it is on the web, one can never be aware of what one is not aware. The upshot of this is that the practical representativeness of the four subreddits cannot be established. But, as argued, my sample provides a good basis for theoretical representativeness: they illustrate four different ways in which a social news site *could*, in theory, cover an election. Thereby, results are generalizable to comparable contexts.

Accepting the above justification, one could still question the validity of using such a limited sample as I did in the analysis of each selected subreddit's contents. But, as I detailed in Chapter 12.1, there are good theoretical reasons for accepting each subreddit-specific sample as representative *of that particular subreddit*.

Finally, in contrast, I am not quite as confident concerning the sample of *comments*, in the analysis of Reddit as a site of interaction. My sample of comments attempted to account for the breadth as well as the depth of conversations, and I believe there are good arguments - detailed in Chapter 13.1 - for accepting the sample as valid at least in the case of smaller subreddits. But in the case of r/politics, where items can attract thousands of comments organized in complicated trees, the representativeness of the sample could be questioned. However, a larger-scale analysis of comments in r/politics could not be realized due to practical constraints.

## Chapter 18. Avenues of further research

This study has examined Reddit from a number of different perspectives, focusing on its structure as a business organization, its affordances as a set of technologies, and its contents as the result of the collaboration of its users. One important way to expand and complement it would be to shift the focus to its audiences.

My study does make inferences about redditors as the producers of the site's contents, but it can only rely on hypotheses and assumptions in a number of important questions regarding redditors *as readers*. It would be especially interesting to know who is using *constitutive* sections of Reddit, why they do so, how they do so, and how Reddit fits into their overall news diet. It would also be important to attempt to draw an analytical map of user categories or roles - i.e. meaningful, systematic and persistent differences between groups of users.

Another line of enquiry could revisit the structural analysis of Reddit, and, perhaps using this study as a baseline, attempt to experiment with various structural factors in order to isolate their effects on the site's performance - to the extent that this is possible. Being open source and flexible, Reddit's architecture lends itself easily to such experimentation: new subreddits could be created where researchers could tweak settings to create environments for controlled experiments.

A further avenue of research could regard this study as a baseline in a diachronic perspective, carrying out equivalent analyses of subsequent elections. The comparison of such studies could help identify transient as well as persistent factors behind the site's performance. Similarly, this study could be replicated using other social news sites as objects of analysis, in an attempt to identify features common to more or all such sites, as well as ones that are specific to just one of them. This might enable us to account for their differences in performance.

Finally, subsequent research could focus on the peculiar finding that emerged from the analysis of arguments put forward by articles that emerged as popular across various subreddits: namely, that around 40% of the claims introduced by these articles were *considered* arguments, that is, ones offering a reasonable justification for a particular political stance (Chapter 12.9). Other studies, in different contexts and using different tools, produced similar results (Wessler 2008, p.8). Further research could investigate whether this ratio is indeed an accurate or even universal indicator of the argumentativeness of mainstream media in the Western world, and if so, what conclusions this allows research to draw concerning the current state of, and expectations for, political journalism.

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## Appendix I. Complete list of *publishers*

See Chapter 12.4.2. Source: publishers' websites, press releases, business directories.

	Website	Self-designation	Headquarters	Owner
ABC News	abcnews.go.com	"breaking national and world news, broadcast video coverage, and exclusive interviews."	New York, NY, USA	The Walt Disney Company
Addicting Info	addictinginfo.org	"a resource to discredit all the lies and propaganda that the right-wing spreads [...], reignite the Ameircan dram and beat back the cloud of indifference that plagues our electorate"	Santa Rosa, Ca., USA	private individuals
Al Jazeera	aljazeera.com	"an international news channel with over sixty bureaus around the world that span six different continents"	Doha, Qatar	Al Jazeera Media Network
AlterNet	alternet.org	"an award-winning news magazine and online community that creates original journalism and amplifies the best of hundreds of other independent media sources"	San Francisco, Ca., USA	Independent Media Institute, "a nonprofit organization that empowers people with independent journalism, information and media tools"
America blog	americablog.com	"a journal of news and opinion about US politics, both domestic and foreign, from a progressive point of view."	Washington, DC, USA	private individuals
Arkansas Times	arktimes.com	"Arkansas's source for news, politics & entertainment"	Little Rock, Arkansas, USA	Arkansas Times Limited Partnership
Boston Review	bostonreview.net	"a magazine of ideas, independent and nonprofit." (Co-edited by Joshua Cohen.)	Boston, Mas., USA	Boston Critic, Inc.
Business Insider	businessinsider.com	"Business Insider publishes news, information, gossip, rumors, conjecture, opinions, and commentary."	New York, NY, USA	Business Insider, Inc.
CBS News	cbsnews.com	"News covering all the latest breaking national and world news headlines"	New York, NY, USA	CBS Corporation
Cincinnati Enquirer	news.cincinnati.com	-	Cincinnati, OH, USA	Gannett Company, Inc.
Comedy Central	comedycentral.com	-	New York, NY, USA	Viacom Entertainment Group
The Daily Dolt	thedailydolt.com	"an irreverent take on news, politics, and the law."	New York, NY, USA	private individuals
The Daily Kos	dailykos.com	"the largest progressive community blog in the United States."	Berkeley, Ca., USA	Kos Media, LLC
David Pakman Show	http://www.youtube.com/user/MidweekPolitics	"political analysis from a progressive point of view, without the corporate, big company spin"; a syndicated multiplatform programme	USA	private individuals
Democracy Now!	democraynow.org	"a daily independent global news hour"; a syndicated multiplatform programme	USA	private individuals
Eclectablog	eclectablog.com	"progressive news and commentary"	Dexter, Michigan, USA	private individuals
FlipKey Blog	flipkey.com	"a vacation rental marketplace"	Boston, Mas., USA	TripAdvisor Media Group
Forbes magazine	forbes.com	"the home page for the world's business leaders"	New York, NY, USA	Forbes, Inc.
FreakOutNation	freakoutnation.com	"liberal and progressive political blog - news, interviews, views and opinion"	USA	private individuals
Gallup	gallup.com	"delivers forward-thinking research, analytics, and advice"	Washington, DC, USA	Gallup, Inc.
God Discussion	goddiscussion.com	"a news and review service targeted for the growing number of people who are not associated with organized religion"	Mercer Island, Wash., USA	S4 Enterprises, LLC

	Website	Self-designation	Headquarters	Owner
The Huffington Post	<a href="http://huffingtonpost.com">huffingtonpost.com</a>	"The best social content on the web"	New York, NY, USA	AOL
Jill Stein's campaign team	<a href="http://jillstein.org">jillstein.org</a>	-	Madison, Wi., USA	Jill Stein For President (campaign organization)
Los Angeles Times	<a href="http://latimes.com">latimes.com</a>	"a leading source of news on Southern California, entertainment, movies, television, music, politics, business [...]"	Los Angeles, Ca, USA	Tribune Company
National Memo	<a href="http://nationalmemo.com">nationalmemo.com</a>	"a political newsletter and website that combines the spirit of investigative journalism with new technology and ideas" [...] "without the kind of propaganda, ultra-partisanship and overwrought ideology that burden so much of our political discourse"	New York, NY, USA	Eastern Harbor Media, LLC.
NBCNews.com	<a href="http://nbcnews.com">nbcnews.com</a>	"a collection of innovative and powerful news brands that deliver compelling, diverse and visually engaging stories on your platform of choice"	New York, NY, USA	NBCUniversal
The New Republic	<a href="http://newrepublic.com">newrepublic.com</a>	"covers politics, culture and big ideas from an unbiased and thought-provoking perspective"	Washington, DC, USA	Editor-in-chief Chris Hughes
New York Magazine	<a href="http://nymag.com">nymag.com</a>	"Daily coverage of New York's restaurants, nightlife, shopping, fashion, politics, and culture."	New York, NY, USA	New York Media, LLC
The New York Times	<a href="http://nytimes.com">nytimes.com</a>	"breaking news, multimedia, reviews & opinion on Washington, business, sports, movies, travel, books, jobs, education, real estate, cars & more."	New York, NY, USA	The New York Times Company
New Yorker	<a href="http://newyorker.com">newyorker.com</a>	"a national weekly magazine that offers a signature mix of reporting and commentary on politics, foreign affairs, business, technology, popular culture and the arts, along with humor, fiction, poetry and cartoons"	New York, NY, USA	Advance Publications
NewsHounds	<a href="http://newshounds.us">newshounds.us</a>	"We watch Fox so you don't have to!"	USA	private individuals
Patheos	<a href="http://patheos.com">patheos.com</a>	"the premier online destination to engage in the global dialogue about religion and spirituality and to explore and experience the world's beliefs."	USA	Patheos, Inc.
Politico	<a href="http://politico.com">politico.com</a>	"We break down the traditional journalistic conventions that make stories dull, predictable and often unreadable. Instead, while holding tightly to principles of fairness and accuracy, we have created a distinctive brand of journalism that drives the conversation"	Arlington, VA., USA	Politico, LLC
Politifact (Tampa Bay Times)	<a href="http://politifact.com">politifact.com</a>	"a project of the Tampa Bay Times and its partners to help you find the truth in politics."	St. Petersburg, Fl, USA	Times Publishing Company
Protect My Public Media (formerly: 170 million Americans for Public Service Broadcast)	<a href="http://protectmypublicmedia.org">protectmypublicmedia.org</a>	"a collaboration of local public radio and television stations, national distributors, producers, viewers, listeners and others who support a strong public media in the United States"	Washington, DC, USA	NPR; Association of Public Television Stations
Raw Story	<a href="http://rawstory.com">rawstory.com</a>	"a progressive news site that focuses on stories often ignored in the mainstream media."	Washington, DC, USA	Raw Story Media, Inc.
Slate	<a href="http://slate.com">slate.com</a>	"a daily magazine on the Web."	Washington, DC, USA	The Washington Post Company
Talking Points Memo	<a href="http://talkingpointsmemo.com">talkingpointsmemo.com</a>	"the premier digital native political news organization in the United States"	New York, NY, USA	TPM Media, LLC.

	<b>Website</b>	<b>Self-designation</b>	<b>Headquarters</b>	<b>Owner</b>
Think Progress	thinkprogress.org	"a project of the Center for American Progress Action Fund. The Center for American Progress Action Fund is a nonpartisan organization."	Washington, DC, USA	Center For American Progress ("an independent nonpartisan educational institute dedicated to improving the lives of Americans through progressive ideas")
University of North Florida	unf.edu	-	Jacksonville, FL, USA	- member of the State University System of Florida -
Village Voice	villagevoice.com	"the nation's first and largest alternative newsweekly"	New York, NY, USA	Voice Media Group
The Washington Post	washingtonpost.com	"authoritative local, national and international news"	Washington, DC, USA	The Washington Post Company
Wikipedia	wikipedia.org	"the free encyclopedia"	St. Petersburg, FL, USA	Wikimedia Foundation
Yahoo! News	news.yahoo.com	"latest news & headlines"	Sunnyvale, Ca., USA	Yahoo! Inc.



## Appendix II. Sampled articles

### Sampled articles in r/politics:

Date of Reddit submission	URL	Title
1 September	<a href="http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/fri-august-31-2012/rnc-2012---the-road-to-jeb-bush-2016---the-best-f--king-news-team-ever-audits-america">http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/fri-august-31-2012/rnc-2012---the-road-to-jeb-bush-2016---the-best-f--king-news-team-ever-audits-america</a>	RNC 2012 - The Road to Jeb Bush 2016 - The Best F...ing News Team Ever Audits America
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/z5vke/fox_news_removes_trending_list_from_front_page/">http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/z5vke/fox_news_removes_trending_list_from_front_page/</a>	Fox News removes trending list from front page because anti-Ryan article is on top
	<a href="http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/31/us/politics/obama-moves-to-speak-on-romneys-character.html?_r=2&amp;">http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/31/us/politics/obama-moves-to-speak-on-romneys-character.html?_r=2&amp;</a>	Obama Team Sharpens Attacks on Rivals' Character
	<a href="http://www.electablog.com/2012/09/the-gops-enduring-clint-eastwood-problem.html">http://www.electablog.com/2012/09/the-gops-enduring-clint-eastwood-problem.html</a>	The GOP's Enduring Clint Eastwood Problem
	<a href="http://www.alternet.org/election-2012/matt-taibbi-reveals-how-romney-made-his-fortune-it-aint-pretty-and-he-shouldnt-be">http://www.alternet.org/election-2012/matt-taibbi-reveals-how-romney-made-his-fortune-it-aint-pretty-and-he-shouldnt-be</a>	Matt Taibbi Reveals How Romney Made His Fortune -- It Ain't Pretty, and He Shouldn't Be Proud of It
3 September	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/za524/i_think_it_s_pretty_clear_reddit_wont_vote_for/">http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/za524/i_think_it_s_pretty_clear_reddit_wont_vote_for/</a>	I think it's pretty clear Reddit won't vote for Romney and Ryan. Instead of beating a dead horse, why don't we start looking into corrupt politics in the congress, which is where the real power is?
	<a href="http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/29/news/la-pn-miners-romney-rally-20120829">http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/29/news/la-pn-miners-romney-rally-20120829</a>	Ohio miners say they were forced to attend Romney rally
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/za5t2/its_september_and_i_still_want_to_see_mitt/">http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/za5t2/its_september_and_i_still_want_to_see_mitt/</a>	It's September and I still want to see Mitt Romneys [sic] tax returns...
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/zak2c/reddit_the_presidential_election_is_important_but/">http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/zak2c/reddit_the_presidential_election_is_important_but/</a>	Reddit, the Presidential election is important. But, please do not forget the importance of the 2012 Congressional elections.
	<a href="http://www.nationalmemo.com/lol-of-the-week-george-w-bush-kept-us-safe/">http://www.nationalmemo.com/lol-of-the-week-george-w-bush-kept-us-safe/</a>	LOL Of The Week: George W. Bush 'Kept Us Safe'
23 September	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rdk55dLsFhc">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rdk55dLsFhc</a>	Safeway voter registration 1
	<a href="http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/09/paul-ryan-talks-space-exploration-accuses-obama-of-dismantling-the-program/">http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/09/paul-ryan-talks-space-exploration-accuses-obama-of-dismantling-the-program/</a>	Paul Ryan Talks Space Exploration, Accuses Obama of 'Dismantling' the Program
	<a href="http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stacy-bare/obama-veterans-bill_b_1290627.html">http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stacy-bare/obama-veterans-bill_b_1290627.html</a>	\$1 Billion Proposal, Part III
	<a href="http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/09/22/1135384/-Romney-to-teacher-I-didn-t-ask-you-a-question">http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/09/22/1135384/-Romney-to-teacher-I-didn-t-ask-you-a-question</a>	Romney to teacher "I didn't ask you a question"
	<a href="http://www.politicususa.com/wheels-fall-romney-obama-leads-nascar-fans-48-41.html">http://www.politicususa.com/wheels-fall-romney-obama-leads-nascar-fans-48-41.html</a>	The Wheels Fall Off for Romney as Obama Leads with NASCAR Fans, 48%-41%
5 October	<a href="http://www.addictinginfo.org/2012/10/04/new-mexico-republican-official-caught-on-video-illegally-teaching-voter-surpression-tactics/">http://www.addictinginfo.org/2012/10/04/new-mexico-republican-official-caught-on-video-illegally-teaching-voter-surpression-tactics/</a>	New Mexico Republican Official Caught On Video Illegally Teaching Voter Suppression Tactics
	<a href="http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/ticket/obama-mocks-romney-getting-tough-big-bird-165202158--election.html">http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/ticket/obama-mocks-romney-getting-tough-big-bird-165202158--election.html</a>	Obama mocks Romney as 'getting tough on Big Bird'
	<a href="http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/10/04/1140384/-Traditional-Social-Media-Collide-Over-Obama-Romney-Debate">http://www.dailykos.com/story/2012/10/04/1140384/-Traditional-Social-Media-Collide-Over-Obama-Romney-Debate</a>	Traditional & Social Media Collide Over Obama/Romney Debate
	<a href="http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/oct/05/barack-obama/obama-says-romney-would-spend-2-trillion-military/">http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2012/oct/05/barack-obama/obama-says-romney-would-spend-2-trillion-military/</a>	Barack Obama says Mitt Romney would spend \$2 trillion that the military hasn't asked for
	<a href="http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/10/05/colbert-lying-worked-for-romney-so-fk-it/">http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/10/05/colbert-lying-worked-for-romney-so-fk-it/</a>	Colbert: Lying worked for Romney, so f*&k it
10 October	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sasfm_fTuyQ">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sasfm_fTuyQ</a>	Who Owns Voting Machines?
	<a href="http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/10/us/politics/black-support-for-obama-uncertain-in-2012.html?_r=1&amp;ref=politics">http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/10/us/politics/black-support-for-obama-uncertain-in-2012.html?_r=1&amp;ref=politics</a>	Obama Looks to Rally Blacks in North Carolina

Date of Reddit submission	URL	Title
	<a href="http://www.villagevoice.com/2012-10-10/columns/mitt-romney-stupidity-Michael-Musto/">http://www.villagevoice.com/2012-10-10/columns/mitt-romney-stupidity-Michael-Musto/</a>	Mitt Romney Leads Us Into an Age of Stupidity
	<a href="http://www.newshounds.us/who_cares_if_romney_lied_during_the_debate_he_looked_good_10092012">http://www.newshounds.us/who_cares_if_romney_lied_during_the_debate_he_looked_good_10092012</a>	Who Cares If Romney Lied During The Debate? He Looked Good!
	<a href="http://www.thedailydolt.com/2012/10/10/former-bain-employees-own-voting-machine-company-used-in-swing-states/">http://www.thedailydolt.com/2012/10/10/former-bain-employees-own-voting-machine-company-used-in-swing-states/</a>	Owners Of Electronic Voting Machine Company Are Romney Super-Fans
11 October	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&amp;v=2E87gciwebw">http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&amp;v=2E87gciwebw</a>	Woman At VP Debate Calls Obama A Communist
	<a href="http://thinkprogress.org/election/2012/10/11/990281/romney-uninsured-hospital/">http://thinkprogress.org/election/2012/10/11/990281/romney-uninsured-hospital/</a>	Romney: 'We Don't Have People Who Die Because They Don't Have Insurance'
	<a href="http://takingnote.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/10/the-lying-precedent/">http://takingnote.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/10/the-lying-precedent/</a>	The Lying Precedent
	<a href="http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/10/jason-chaffetz-embassy_n_1954912.html?utm_hp_ref=politics">http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/10/jason-chaffetz-embassy_n_1954912.html?utm_hp_ref=politics</a>	Jason Chaffetz Admits House GOP Cut Funding For Embassy Security: 'You Have To Prioritize Things'
	<a href="http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dana-milbank-letting-us-in-on-a-secret/2012/10/10/ba3136ca-132b-11e2-ba83-a7a396e6b2a7_story.html?hpid=z7">http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dana-milbank-letting-us-in-on-a-secret/2012/10/10/ba3136ca-132b-11e2-ba83-a7a396e6b2a7_story.html?hpid=z7</a>	Letting us in on a secret
16 October	<a href="http://www.businessinsider.com/rudy-giuliani-endorses-mitt-romney-but-it-could-backfire-2012-4">http://www.businessinsider.com/rudy-giuliani-endorses-mitt-romney-but-it-could-backfire-2012-4</a>	Rudy Giuliani Used To Slam Romney As A Flip-Flopper, But Now He Is Thrilled To Endorse Him
	<a href="http://www.forbes.com/sites/rickungar/2012/10/16/ryans-despicable-soup-kitchen-antics-a-perfect-metaphor-for-gop-tickets-disrespect-for-the-poor/">http://www.forbes.com/sites/rickungar/2012/10/16/ryans-despicable-soup-kitchen-antics-a-perfect-metaphor-for-gop-tickets-disrespect-for-the-poor/</a>	Ryan's Despicable Soup Kitchen Antics A Perfect Metaphor For GOP Ticket's Disrespect For The Poor
	<a href="http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2012/10/15/charity-president-unhappy-about-paul-ryan-soup-kitchen-photo-op/">http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2012/10/15/charity-president-unhappy-about-paul-ryan-soup-kitchen-photo-op/</a>	Charity president unhappy about Paul Ryan soup kitchen 'photo op'
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/11lj06/special_mod_announcement_rpoltics_open_thread/">http://www.reddit.com/r/politics/comments/11lj06/special_mod_announcement_rpoltics_open_thread/</a>	Special Mod Announcement: r/Politics Open thread about tonight's Presidential Debate between President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney! Please Click here!
	<a href="http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/10/16/anderson-cooper-calls-out-romney-for-claiming-blog-posts-are-tax-plan-studies/">http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/10/16/anderson-cooper-calls-out-romney-for-claiming-blog-posts-are-tax-plan-studies/</a>	Anderson Cooper calls out Romney for claiming 'blog posts' are tax plan studies

## Sampled articles in r/2012elections:

Date of Reddit submission	URL	Title
1 September	<a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_W._Romney#1968_presidential_campaign">http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_W._Romney#1968_presidential_campaign</a>	Romney's Dad was born in Mexico but ran for President anyway
	<a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csXrKDsBxTg&amp;feature=channel&amp;list=UL">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csXrKDsBxTg&amp;feature=channel&amp;list=UL</a>	Romney-Koch Handshake: Network TV Misses Revealing RNC Moment Between Nominee & Billionair
	<a href="http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/scocca/2012/08/clint_eastwood_gop_convention_the_romney_campaign_sells_out_its_surprise_speaker_single.html">http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/scocca/2012/08/clint_eastwood_gop_convention_the_romney_campaign_sells_out_its_surprise_speaker_single.html</a>	The Assassination of Clint Eastwood by the Coward Mitt Romney
	<a href="http://www.nbcnews.com/id/26315908/vp/48808548#48808548">http://www.nbcnews.com/id/26315908/vp/48808548#48808548</a>	Unpopular with minorities, Romney targets 'white vote'
	<a href="http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/08/29/5-question-for-libertarian-presidential-candidate-gary-johnson-on-being-screwed-over-by-the-gop/">http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2012/08/29/5-question-for-libertarian-presidential-candidate-gary-johnson-on-being-screwed-over-by-the-gop/</a>	5 Questions For: Libertarian presidential candidate Gary Johnson on being screwed over by the GOP
3 September	<a href="http://www.gallup.com/poll/157256/gop-convention-romney-speech-evoke-lukewarm-reactions.aspx">http://www.gallup.com/poll/157256/gop-convention-romney-speech-evoke-lukewarm-reactions.aspx</a>	GOP Convention, Romney Speech Evoke Lukewarm Reactions
	<a href="http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2012/08/29/766141/brown-back-romney-ads-fals/">http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2012/08/29/766141/brown-back-romney-ads-fals/</a>	GOP Governor Acknowledges That Romney's Welfare Attack Ads Are False
	<a href="http://i.imgur.com/eNwtZ.jpg">http://i.imgur.com/eNwtZ.jpg</a>	-no title-
	<a href="http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2012/09/david-koch-steps-out-of-the-shadows.html">http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/newsdesk/2012/09/david-koch-steps-out-of-the-shadows.html</a>	Out of the Shadows

Date of Reddit submission	URL	Title
	<a href="http://www.goddiscussion.com/100268/over-320000-christians-pledge-to-vote-for-jesus-as-president/">http://www.goddiscussion.com/100268/over-320000-christians-pledge-to-vote-for-jesus-as-president/</a>	Over 320,000 Christians pledge to vote for Jesus as president
23 September	<a href="http://news.cincinnati.com/article/20120923/NEWS010601/309230026&amp;Ref=AR?nclick_check=1">http://news.cincinnati.com/article/20120923/NEWS010601/309230026&amp;Ref=AR?nclick_check=1</a>	Divided state still a toss-up
	<a href="http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2012/09/17/rush-limbaugh-says-welfare-recipients-turn-out-to-vote-in-force-they-really-dont/">http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2012/09/17/rush-limbaugh-says-welfare-recipients-turn-out-to-vote-in-force-they-really-dont/</a>	Rush Limbaugh says welfare recipients turn out to vote in force. They really don't.
	<a href="http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0912/81456.html">http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0912/81456.html</a>	Gary Johnson has best ever haul
	<a href="http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2012/09/201291763829868734.html">http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2012/09/201291763829868734.html</a>	Inside America's 'swing states'
	<a href="http://news.yahoo.com/tide-shifting-toward-obama-battleground-states-111916798.html">http://news.yahoo.com/tide-shifting-toward-obama-battleground-states-111916798.html</a>	Tide shifting toward Obama in battleground state
5 October	<a href="http://i.imgur.com/AUPM1.jpg">http://i.imgur.com/AUPM1.jpg</a>	- no title -
	<a href="http://www.newrepublic.com/blog/plank/108134/romney-pre-existing-condition-adviser-fehrnstrom-debate-spin">http://www.newrepublic.com/blog/plank/108134/romney-pre-existing-condition-adviser-fehrnstrom-debate-spin</a>	Romney Adviser: Actually, My Boss Was Wrong Up There
	<a href="http://washington.cbslocal.com/2012/10/05/upon-further-review-mitt-romney-may-have-cheated-to-win-the-debate/#.UG77INBp4RA.reddit">http://washington.cbslocal.com/2012/10/05/upon-further-review-mitt-romney-may-have-cheated-to-win-the-debate/#.UG77INBp4RA.reddit</a>	Opinion: Upon Further Review: Mitt Romney May Have Cheated To Win The Debate
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/10z4lg/mitt_romney_it_would_seem_sneaked_notes_into_the/">http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/10z4lg/mitt_romney_it_would_seem_sneaked_notes_into_the/</a>	Mitt Romney, it would seem, sneaked notes into the debate. Is he still a winner in the eyes of the hivemind?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/10yzbc/henceforth_romneys_debate_technique_shall_be/">http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/10yzbc/henceforth_romneys_debate_technique_shall_be/</a>	Henceforth, Romney's debate technique shall be known as the Shaggy strategy. When confronted with his own policies, he simply says "It wasn't me," and moves on.
10 October	<a href="http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/10/scott-desjarlais-abortion-pro-life_n_1953136.html">http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/10/scott-desjarlais-abortion-pro-life_n_1953136.html</a>	Scott DesJarlais, Pro-Life Republican Congressman And Doctor, Pressured Mistress Patient To Get Abortion (UPDATE)
	<a href="http://thinkprogress.org/election/2012/10/10/982471/suddenly-centrist-the-new-moderate-mitt-romney/">http://thinkprogress.org/election/2012/10/10/982471/suddenly-centrist-the-new-moderate-mitt-romney/</a>	Suddenly Centrist: The New Moderate Mitt Romney
	<a href="http://freakoutnation.com/2012/10/09/obamas-lead-widens-in-minnesota-by-10-percent-61-percent-of-republicans-believe-polls-are-skewed/">http://freakoutnation.com/2012/10/09/obamas-lead-widens-in-minnesota-by-10-percent-61-percent-of-republicans-believe-polls-are-skewed/</a>	Obama's lead widens in Minnesota by 10 percent, 61 percent of Republicans believe polls are skewed
	<a href="http://www.arktimes.com/ArkansasBlog/archives/2012/10/08/republican-candidate-fuqua-endorses-death-penalty-for-rebellious-children">http://www.arktimes.com/ArkansasBlog/archives/2012/10/08/republican-candidate-fuqua-endorses-death-penalty-for-rebellious-children</a>	UPDATES: Republican candidate Fuqua endorses death penalty for rebellious children
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/118i3i/i_understand_reddit_is_not_a_mirror_of_us_public/">http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/118i3i/i_understand_reddit_is_not_a_mirror_of_us_public/</a>	I understand Reddit is not a mirror of US public opinion, but which Romney do you think we will actually get if he is elected?
11 October	<a href="http://americablog.com/2012/10/so-where-are-the-rest-of-romneys-tax-documents.html">http://americablog.com/2012/10/so-where-are-the-rest-of-romneys-tax-documents.html</a>	Forget about Mitt's taxes. Check out Ryan's abs!
	<a href="http://www.unf.edu/publicrelations/media_relations/press/2012/University_of_North_Florida_Poll_Reveals_Slight_Lead_for_Obama_in_Florida.aspx">http://www.unf.edu/publicrelations/media_relations/press/2012/University_of_North_Florida_Poll_Reveals_Slight_Lead_for_Obama_in_Florida.aspx</a>	University of North Florida Poll Reveals Slight Lead for Obama in Florida
	<a href="http://www.flipkey.com/blog/2012/10/10/how-to-travel-like-a-president/">http://www.flipkey.com/blog/2012/10/10/how-to-travel-like-a-president/</a>	How to Travel Like a President
	<a href="http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/10/11/us/politics/quinnipiac-new-york-times-cbs-poll-results.html?_r=0">http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/10/11/us/politics/quinnipiac-new-york-times-cbs-poll-results.html?_r=0</a>	Results of the Latase Quinnipiac University / New York Times / CBS News Poll
	<a href="http://firstread.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/10/10/14352371-nbcwsjmarist-poll-romney-gains-in-key-swing-states?lite">http://firstread.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/10/10/14352371-nbcwsjmarist-poll-romney-gains-in-key-swing-states?lite</a>	NBC/WSJ/Marist poll: Romney gains in key swing states
16 October	<a href="http://www.jillstein.org/mockumentary_debate?utm_campaign=cpd_arrest1&amp;recruiter_id=199469&amp;utm_medium=email&amp;utm_source=jillstein">http://www.jillstein.org/mockumentary_debate?utm_campaign=cpd_arrest1&amp;recruiter_id=199469&amp;utm_medium=email&amp;utm_source=jillstein</a>	Jill Stein, Cheri Honkala arrested, call tonight's debate a "mockumentary"
	<a href="http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2012/10/15/charity-president-unhappy-about-paul-ryan-soup-kitchen-photo-op/">http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2012/10/15/charity-president-unhappy-about-paul-ryan-soup-kitchen-photo-op/</a>	Charity president unhappy about Paul Ryan soup kitchen 'photo op'
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/11knev/i_m_a_hofstra_student_oreillys_crew_is_here_asking/">http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/11knev/i_m_a_hofstra_student_oreillys_crew_is_here_asking/</a>	I'm a Hofstra student. O'Reilly's crew is here, asking students if they're liberal and then grilling them. I have a prediction for an O'Reilly factor segment tonight.
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/111119/dear_candy_crowley/">http://www.reddit.com/r/2012Elections/comments/111119/dear_candy_crowley/</a>	Dear Candy Crowley,

Date of Reddit submission	URL	Title
	<a href="http://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2012/08/29/mitt-romney-tells-533-lies-in-30-weeks-steve-benen-documents-them/">http://www.patheos.com/blogs/slacktivist/2012/08/29/mitt-romney-tells-533-lies-in-30-weeks-steve-benen-documents-them/</a>	Mitt Romney tells 533 lies in 30 weeks, Steve Benen documents them

### Sampled articles in r/politicaldiscussion:

Date of Reddit submission	URL	Title
1 September	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z6ome/what_are_your_predictions_of_what_the_response/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z6ome/what_are_your_predictions_of_what_the_response/</a>	What are your predictions of what the response will be from Liberals if Romney wins?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z7b6h/minority_rights/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z7b6h/minority_rights/</a>	Minority rights?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z5x4h/two_colorado_university_professors_who_have/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z5x4h/two_colorado_university_professors_who_have/</a>	Two Colorado University professors who have correctly predicted every election since 1980 have predicted a landslide for Romney. Thoughts?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z5xam/what_would_happen_if_president_obama_was/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z5xam/what_would_happen_if_president_obama_was/</a>	What would happen if President Obama was assassinated the day before the election?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z60si/the_only_way_to_fix_this_country_is_not_voting_in/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/z60si/the_only_way_to_fix_this_country_is_not_voting_in/</a>	The only way to fix this country is not voting in R or D, but fundamental reform of how Washington works
3 September	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/za6cp/what_would_have_to_happen_between_now_and/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/za6cp/what_would_have_to_happen_between_now_and/</a>	What would have to happen between now and November 6 for Romney to defeat Obama?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/zatde/anyone_else_notice_a_lack_of_presidential_bumper/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/zatde/anyone_else_notice_a_lack_of_presidential_bumper/</a>	Anyone else notice a lack of Presidential bumper stickers on cars?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/zb2uv/do_you_think_making_election_day_a_national/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/zb2uv/do_you_think_making_election_day_a_national/</a>	Do you think making election day a national holiday would improve voter turnout?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/zaq2x/liberals_why_do_you_hate_conservatives/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/zaq2x/liberals_why_do_you_hate_conservatives/</a>	Liberals, why do you hate conservatives?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/za45h/direct_democracy_response_to_common_criticism/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/za45h/direct_democracy_response_to_common_criticism/</a>	Direct democracy - response to common criticism with solutions
23 September	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10c6yv/lets_assume_that_every_politician_has_a_price_tag/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10c6yv/lets_assume_that_every_politician_has_a_price_tag/</a>	Let's assume that every politician has a price tag - Democrat, Republican or Independent - and the outcome of this or any election won't change that. What can we do, as the American people, to change the direction of this country?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10c4ed/what_i_as_european_dont_understand_about_american/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10c4ed/what_i_as_european_dont_understand_about_american/</a>	What I as European don't understand about American Voter ID laws.
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10cw3e/examples_of_how_keynsian_economics_works_in_the/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10cw3e/examples_of_how_keynsian_economics_works_in_the/</a>	Examples of how Keynesian economics works in the past fifty years?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10czvo/is_anyone_else_sick_of_sound_bites_and_how_they/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10czvo/is_anyone_else_sick_of_sound_bites_and_how_they/</a>	Is anyone else sick of sound bites, and how they have dumbed down our political discourse into stupid catchy phrases? Is there any chance of sound bites being phased out?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10byav/what_issues_are_not_receiving_enough_attention_in/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10byav/what_issues_are_not_receiving_enough_attention_in/</a>	What issues are not receiving enough attention in this election cycle, and why do they deserve our attention?
5 October	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10zqsy/when_it_comes_to_3rd_party_candidates_shouldnt_we/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10zqsy/when_it_comes_to_3rd_party_candidates_shouldnt_we/</a>	When it comes to 3rd party candidates shouldn't we be trying a bottom up growth approach versus a top down?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10zs9r/if_you_like_pbs_donate_money_to_pbs/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10zs9r/if_you_like_pbs_donate_money_to_pbs/</a>	If you like PBS, donate money to PBS.
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10zjiq/why_dont_thirdparty_candidates_respond_to_the/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10zjiq/why_dont_thirdparty_candidates_respond_to_the/</a>	Why don't third-party candidates respond to the debate questions as though they were allowed to attend?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11031g/has_the_decline_of_states_rights_helped_polarize/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11031g/has_the_decline_of_states_rights_helped_polarize/</a>	Has the decline of state's rights helped polarize the country by not allowing the test and failure of alternative philosophies?
	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10zt0u/if_your_tax_plan_is_revenue_neutral_then_why_is/">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/10zt0u/if_your_tax_plan_is_revenue_neutral_then_why_is/</a>	If your tax plan is revenue neutral, then why is it worth doing?
10 October	<a href="http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/119">http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/119</a>	The whole 'Big Bird' argument the Obama campaign is making is a

Date of Reddit submission	URL	Title
	7pk/the_whole_big_bird_argument_the_obama_campaign_i_s/	giant red herring, and everyone is going along with it.
	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/119uib/this_presidential_race_isnt_actually_close_in/	This presidential race isn't actually close, in spite of the headlines
	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/118x1k/how_do_you_defend_obama_upholding_the_ndaa/	How do you defend Obama upholding the NDAA?
	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/118zq2/take_back_our_country_lawn_sign/	Take Back Our Country - Lawn Sign
	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/119awk/what_will_happen_to_america_if_romney_wins/	What will happen to America if Romney Wins?
11 October	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11b4qv/how_do_you_defend_obama_aggressively_going_after/	How do you defend Obama aggressively going after whistleblowers, when his 2008 campaign promise was to protect them?
	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11aa0i/benghazi_terrorist_attack_if_you_search_reddit/	Benghazi terrorist attack. If you search reddit, you will find 14 posts on this topic. There are no comments on any of them.
	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11atgg/does_anyone_remember_a_few_weeks_ago_when/	Does anyone remember a few weeks ago when right-wing pundits kept telling us that the polls (even their own) couldn't be trusted?
	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11bl82/great_quote_regarding_the_shady_organization/	Great quote regarding the shady organization which runs the presidential debates.
	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11aspt/how_will_the_obama_campaign_defend_against_the/	How will the Obama campaign defend against the idea "that their new strategy is basically just call us liars", if they decide to confront Romney on his lies in the next debate?
16 October	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11lhr/live_discussion_for_the_second_presidential/	Live Discussion for the second presidential debate: 10-16-12
	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11ktx9/i_am_horrified_over_how_irrelevant_being_truthful/	I am horrified over how irrelevant being truthful has become.
	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11kc7v/father_of_neoclassical_economics_cant_decide_who/	Father of neoclassical economics can't decide who to vote for in 2012. In 1890.
	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11jt0y/a_question_for_the_people_that_want_increased/	A question for the people that want increased government regulation and services:
	http://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/11kf8i/any_women_here_voting_for_romney_if_so_why/	Any women here voting for Romney? If so, why?

### Sampled articles in r/republicofpolitics:

Date of Reddit submission	URL	Title
5 October	http://170millionamericans.org/	Support Big Bird, Join 170 Million Americans for Public Broadcasting
10 October	http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/04/money-power-and-the-rule-of-law/	Money, Power and the Rule of Law
11 October	http://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/09/27/the-unraveling-of-government/?_r=0	The Unraveling of Government
	http://www.bostonreview.net/BR37.5/george_scialabba_jonathan_haidt_richard_sennett_conservatism_morality.php	Head and Heart - Are Conservatives More Moral?
16 October	http://nymag.com/news/politics/elections-2012/bill-hillary-clinton-2012-10/	Bill & Hillary Forever - If Obama wins, it may be because the former president saved his presidency- but what exactly do the Clintons get in return?

# APPENDIX III. Chapter-by-chapter summary

## Part I. Introduction

### Chapter 1. An overview of the project

Social news sites are nominal tools of information democratization: they enable ordinary people to participate in the curation, production, distribution and review of public information. Does this entail substantial democratization too? I try to find out by looking at how, and how well, Reddit covered the 2012 US presidential election campaign. I evaluate the site's performance against three different ideal concepts of democracy.

### Chapter 2. Literature review

An overview is provided about normative media theory, with a special focus on normative critique of new media (blogs, social network sites, news aggregators and discussion forums). In this context, existing literature specifically about social news sites is reviewed. Much of this literature deals with social news sites in a content-agnostic manner (unlike my project).

## Part II. Theoretical background

### Chapter 3. Preface to the theoretical background

My research strategy consists in conceptualizing criteria of democratic media on the basis of different theories of democracy, and applying these requirements to empirical data provided by Reddit.

An important distinction is made between *constitutive* and *non-constitutive* media. Constitutive media are part of the formal political system, by virtue of disseminating political information, dealing in political advocacy, and/or providing a political forum for citizens.

### Chapter 4. Liberal-individualist democracy

I use liberalism to refer to what Rawls calls political liberalism, as a system of justice. Liberalism thus understood attempts to reconcile different views in just coexistence. Democracy is not an end in itself: it is the means of reconciling the interests of free, rational, and autonomous individuals to the greatest possible extent. One of the important liberties is that of *freedom of expression (FoE)*, which is the most important value that constitutive media organs should honour. The public sphere should be a free marketplace of ideas.

## **Chapter 5. Communitarian-republican democracy**

Liberalism got things backward: citizens cannot become free and autonomous in any meaningful way without contributing to the community. Being a member of a community empowers us with positive liberties, and thus we have a responsibility to maintain and nurture that community. Thus, the communitarian-republican model values the substantial realization of *FoE*, just like the liberal-individualist model, but it also recognizes the role of public communication in forging and nurturing communities. The public sphere should be an agora, in that it should enable and encourage citizens' political participation, the creation and maintenance of social connections, and the bonding of citizens in a meaningful community of shared responsibility.

## **Chapter 6. Deliberative democracy**

In this model, the legitimacy of political decisions depends on a political process that requires citizens' discursive participation - in other words, deliberation. The task of the public sphere is, accordingly, to “ensure the formation of a plurality of considered opinions” through deliberation. Constitutive media, as important actors in the public sphere, should supply citizens with a wide range of diverse opinions and information (*FoE*), and also enable and facilitate the public deliberation of citizens.

## **Chapter 7. Models of democracy - a summary**

# **Part III. Methods**

## **Chapter 8. An analytical framework**

A framework developed by Peter Dahlgren is used for analysis. This framework takes a public sphere perspective, and advocates three-dimensional analysis, the three dimensions being the *structural*, the *representational*, and the *interactional*. In the specific case of Reddit, these overlapping and complementary dimensions translate to: analysis of Reddit's organization and infrastructure; its primary contents (the articles featured in its output); and its secondary contents (documents of discursive interaction of redditors).

## **Chapter 9. Conceptualization of normative criteria**

First, the context of Reddit is introduced. Then normative requirements are formulated on a conceptual level, in the *structural*, *representational* and *interactional* dimensions. Table 4 in Chapter 9.5. presents a summary of conceptualized criteria in a 3 by 3 matrix: 3 models and 3 analytical dimensions. For instance, in deliberative democracy, criteria in the *interactional* dimension would require that redditors' discussions involve reasoned argumentation.

## **Chapter 10. Operationalization of normative criteria**

First, the practical context of the 2012 US presidential election is introduced. Each subsequent chapter is then divided into two parts: first, a general introduction to the methods used in a particular analytical dimension, and second, a detailed operationalization that corresponds to the methods used.

The *structural* analysis is based on an interpretive, qualitative description of Reddit as an organization in control of a set of technologies. In the *representational* dimension, quantitative and qualitative analysis of the site's primary contents (news articles) is carried out. In the *interactional* dimension, quantitative and qualitative analysis of the site's secondary contents (discussions between redditors) is carried out.

## **Part IV. Results of the analysis**

### **Chapter 11. Analysis of the structural dimension**

Reddit's structural organization establishes an equality of opportunity, but not of enacted practices. Users might be equal, but their votes are not, and the central mechanism of the site - cooperative news aggregation and filtering based on user feedback - is likely to encourage the creation of homogeneous communities. At the same time, Reddit in theory could serve as an ideal setting for deliberation - but its success in this regard depends very much on its users.

### **Chapter 12. Analysis of the representational dimension**

First, a sample of relevant - constitutive - sections of Reddit was selected. The analysis of their contents revealed them to be mostly partisan (supporting the Democratic Party), complacent (not promoting or facilitating political participation), civil, and up-to-date. Contents were found to originate from an exceeding number of diverse sources, which, however, tended to cohere ideologically. They could have acted as reasonable basis for deliberation, but did not deliver themselves a "plurality of considered opinions."

### **Chapter 13. Analysis of the interactional dimension**

First, a sample of discussion threads was selected. Their analysis revealed them to represent low levels of discursive activity. Few redditors tend to take part in conversations - but those who do seem to have a tendency to listen to one another (conversations tended to be interactive). Discussions in most constitutive sections emerged as ideologically homogeneous ("echo chambers"), overwhelmingly civil, and failing to reach reflexivity required by deliberative democracy. The performance of a smaller subreddit was better than that of others.



## **Chapter 14. Reddit as an agent of democracy?**

The site's coverage of the 2012 US presidential election campaign failed to meet standards of the liberal-individualist model, as it did not realize the principle of free expression in a meaningful, substantial manner. Neither did it satisfy communitarian-republican requirements, as most of its constitutive sections emerged as homogeneous communities of like-minded individuals, as opposed to inclusive communities of citizens sharing a political responsibility. And constitutive sections largely failed to live up to expectations of the deliberative model of democracy, too.

## **Part V. Conclusion**

### **Chapter 15. Verdict: mostly inadequate**

Reddit, thus, mostly failed to live up to the promise of being an open, tolerant site of information democratization. However, a nuanced evaluation should take differences between various constitutive sections into consideration. This reveals that not all sections performed equally badly; a smaller subreddit ([r/politicaldiscussion](#)) in particular came close to meeting operational criteria of democratic constitutive media.

### **Chapter 16. Reflections: A necessary technological fix?**

One way to improve Reddit's performance would be to acknowledge its limits, and apply meta-level filtering. Reddit filters and aggregates, but also *models* the world wide web, in that its contents are expansive, and the biggest problem becomes finding its best bits, truly worthy of attention, and filtering out what is of inferior quality. Thus, constitutive sections of the site could apply reflexivity to the contents that Reddit itself has produced.

This would not be a radical solution, acknowledging the limits of technological fixes to social problems. But an argument is offered in favour of the pursuit of further such technological fixes.

### **Chapter 17. Limitations**

This study is limited in a number of important ways. Reddit is a moving target; and the specificity of the case (US elections) questions the generalizability of the findings. The study evaluates output and actual performance, but does not explore in depth the causes leading to that output. And its sample is limited in some respects.

### **Chapter 18. Avenues of further research**

A number of different lines of further enquiry are proposed. One of these could explore a coincidence regarding a general, average level of argumentativeness of constitutive media in different national environments.